













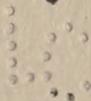
THE BURNING SECRET



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**THE  
BURNING SECRET**

By  
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*"Zweig, Stefan"*



**NEW YORK  
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THE BURNING SECRET



## CHAPTER I

### THE PARTNER

THE train, with a shrill whistle, pulled into Summering. For a moment the black coaches stood still in the silvery light of the uplands to eject a few vivid human figures and to swallow up others. Exacerbated voices called back and forth; then, with a puffing and a chugging and another shrill shriek, the dark train clattered into the opening of the tunnel, and once more the landscape stretched before the view unbroken in all its wide expanse, the background swept clean by the moist wind.

One of the arrivals, a young man pleasantly distinguished by his good dress and elastic walk, hurried ahead of the others and entered one of the hotel 'buses. The horses took the

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steep road leisurely. Spring was in the air. Up in the sky floated the white shifting clouds of May and June, light, sportive young creatures, playfully coursing the blue path of heaven, suddenly dipping and hiding behind the mountains, embracing and running away, crumpling up like handkerchiefs, elongating into gauzy scarfs, and ending their play by roguishly perching white caps on the mountain tops. There was unrest below, too, in the wind, which shook the lean trees, still wet from the rain, and set their limbs a-groaning softly and brought down a thousand shining drops. Sometimes a cool breath of snow descended from the mountains, and then there was a feel in the air both balmy and cutting. All things in the atmosphere and on the earth were in motion and astir with the ferment of impatience. The horses tossed their heads and snorted as they now trotted down a descent, the sound of their bells jingling far ahead of them.

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## *The Partner*

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On arriving at the hotel, the young man made straight for the registry and looked over the list of guests. He was disappointed.

“What the deuce have I come here for?” he thought in vexation. “Stuck ’way up here on top of the mountain all alone, no company; why it’s worse than the office. I must have come either too early or too late. I never do have luck with my holidays. Not a single name do I know. If only there was a woman or two here to pick up a flirtation with, even a perfectly innocent one, if it must be, just to keep the week from being too utterly dismal.”

The young man, a baron not very high up in the country’s nobility, held a government position, and had secured this short vacation not because he required it particularly, but because his colleagues had all got a week off in spring and he saw no reason for making a present of his “week off” to the government. Although not without inner resources, he was a

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thoroughly social being, his sociability being the very quality for which his friends liked him and for which he was welcomed in all circles. He was quite conscious of his inability to stay by himself and had no inclination to meet himself, as it were, but rather avoided his own company, feeling not the least urge to become intimately acquainted with his own soul. He knew he required contact with other human beings to kindle his talents and stir up the warmth and exuberance of his spirits. Alone he was like a match in a box, frosty and useless.

He paced up and down the hall, completely out of sorts, stopping now and then irresolutely to turn the leaves of the magazines, or to glance at the newspapers, or to strike up a waltz on the piano in the music-room. Finally he sat down in a sulk and watched the growing dusk and the gray mist steal in patches between the fir-trees. After a long, vain,

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fretful hour he took refuge in the dining-room.

As yet only a few of the tables were occupied. He took them in at a swift glance. No use. No one he knew, except—he responded to the greeting listlessly—a gentleman to whom he had spoken on the train, and farther off a familiar face from the metropolis. No one else. Not a single woman to promise even a momentary adventure. He became more and more impatient and out of sorts.

Being a young man favored with a handsome face, he was always prepared for a new experience. He was of the sort of men who are constantly on the lookout for an opportunity to plunge into an adventure for the sake of its novelty, yet whom nothing surprises because, forever lying in wait, they have calculated every possibility in advance. Such men never overlook any element of the erotic. The very first glance they cast at a woman is a

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probe into the sensual, a searching, impartial probe that knows no distinction between the wife of a friend or the maid who opens the door to her house. One rarely realizes, in using the ready-made word "woman-hunter," which we toss in contempt at such men, how true the expression is and how much of faithful observation it implies. In their watchful alertness all the passionate instincts of the chase are afire, the stalking, the excitement, the cruel cunning. They are always at their post, always ready and determined to follow the tracks of an adventure up to the very brink of the precipice, always loaded with passion, not with the passion of a lover, but with the cold, calculating, dangerous passion of a gambler. Some of them are doggedly persevering, their whole life shaping itself, from this expectancy, into one perpetual adventure. Each day is divided for them into a hundred little sensual experiences—a passing look, a

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## *The Partner*

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flitting smile, an accidental contact of the knees—and each year into a hundred such days, in which the sensual experience constitutes the ever-flowing, life-giving and quickening source of their existence.

There was no partner for a game here—that the baron's experienced eye instantly detected. And there is nothing more exasperating than for a player with cards in his hands, conscious of his ability, to be sitting at the green table vainly awaiting a partner. The baron called for a newspaper, but merely ran his eyes down the columns fretfully. His thoughts were crippled and he stumbled over the words.

Suddenly he heard the rustling of a dress and a woman's voice saying in a slightly vexed tone:

*“Mais tais toi donc, Edgar.”* Her accent was affected.

A tall voluptuous figure in silk crackled by

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his table, followed by a small, pale boy in a black velvet suit. The boy eyed the baron curiously, as the two seated themselves at a table reserved for them opposite to him. The child was making evident efforts to be correct in his behavior, but propriety seemed to be out of keeping with the dark, restless expression of his eyes.

The lady—the young man's attention was fixed upon her only—was very much betoiletted and dressed with conspicuous elegance. She was a type that particularly appealed to the baron, a Jewess with a somewhat opulent figure, close to, though not yet arrived at, the borderline of overmaturity, and evidently of a passionate nature like his, yet sufficiently experienced to hide her temperament behind a veil of dignified melancholy. He could not see her eyes, but was able to admire the lovely curve of her eyebrows arching clean and well-defined above a nose delicate yet nobly curved

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and giving her face distinction. It was her nose that betrayed her race. Her hair, in keeping with everything else about her, was remarkably luxuriant. Her beauty seemed to have grown sated and boastful with the sure sense of the wealth of admiration it had evoked.

She gave her order in a very low voice and told the boy to stop making a noise with his fork, this with apparent indifference to the baron's cautious, stealthy gaze. She seemed not to observe his look, though, as a matter of fact, it was his keen, alert vigilance that had made her constrained.

A flash lit up the gloom of the baron's face. His nerves responded as to an underground current, his muscles tautened, his figure straightened up, fire came to his eyes. He was not unlike the women who require a masculine presence to bring out their full powers. He needed the stimulation of sex completely

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to energize his faculties. The hunter in him scented the prey. His eyes tried to challenge hers, and her glance crossed his, but waveringly without ever giving an occasional relaxation of the muscles round her mouth, as if in an incipient smile, but he was not sure, and the very uncertainty of it aroused him. The one thing that held out promise was her constant looking away from him, which argued both resistance and embarrassment. Then, too, the conversation that she kept up with her child encouraged him, being obviously designed for show, while her outward calm, he felt, was forced and quite superficial, actually indicating the commencement of inner agitation. He was a-quiver. The play had begun.

He made his dinner last a long while, and for a full half-hour, almost steadily, he kept the woman fixed with his gaze, until it had travelled over every line of her face and touched, unseen, every spot of her body.

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## *The Partner*

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Outside the darkness fell heavily, the woods groaned as if in childish fear of the large, rain-laden clouds stretching out gray hands after them. The shadows deepened in the room, and the silence seemed to press the people closer together. Under the dead weight of the stillness, the baron clearly noted that the mother's conversation with her son became still more constrained and artificial and would soon, he was sure, cease altogether.

He resolved upon an experiment. He rose and went to the door slowly, looking past the woman at the prospect outside. At the door he gave a quick turn, as if he had forgotten something, and caught her looking at him with keen interest. That titillated him.

He waited in the hall. Presently she appeared, holding the boy's hand and paused for a while to look through some magazines and show the child a few pictures. The baron walked up to the table with a casual air, pre-

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tending to hunt for a periodical. His real intention was to probe deeper below the moist sheen of her eyes and perhaps even begin a conversation.

The woman instantly turned away and tapped the boy's shoulder.

*"Viens, Edgar. Au lit."*

She rustled past the baron. He followed her with his eyes, somewhat disappointed. He had counted upon making the acquaintance that very evening. Her brusque manner was disconcerting. However, there was a fascination in her resistance, and the very uncertainty added zest to the chase. At all events he had found a partner, and the play could begin.

## CHAPTER II

### QUICK FRIENDSHIP

THE next morning, on entering the hall, the baron saw the son of the beautiful Unknown engaged in an eager conversation with the two elevator boys, to whom he was showing pictures in a book by Du Chaillu. His mother was not with him, probably not having come down from her room yet.

The baron took his first good look at the boy. He seemed to be a shy, undeveloped, nervous little fellow, about twelve years old. His movements were jerky, his eyes dark and restless, and he made the impression, so often produced by children of his age, of being scared, as if he had just been roused out of sleep and placed in strange surroundings. His

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face was not unbeautiful, but still quite undecided. The struggle between childhood and young manhood seemed just about to be setting in. Everything in him so far was like dough that has been kneaded but not formed into a loaf. Nothing was expressed in clean lines, everything was blurred and unsettled. He was at that hobbledehoy age when clothes do not fit, and sleeves and trousers hang slouchily, and there is no vanity to prompt care of one's appearance.

The child made a rather pitiful impression as he wandered about the hotel aimlessly. He got in everybody's way. He would plague the porter with questions and then be shoved aside, for he would stand in the doorway and obstruct the passage. Apparently there were no other children for him to play with, and in his child's need for prattle he would try to attach himself to one or other of the hotel attendants. When they had time they would

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## *Quick Friendship*

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answer him, but the instant an adult came along they would stop talking and refuse to pay any more attention to him.

It interested the baron to watch the child, and he looked on smiling as the unhappy little creature inspected everything and everybody curiously, while he himself was universally avoided as a nuisance. Once the baron intercepted one of his curious looks. His black eyes instantly fell, when he saw himself observed, and hid behind lowered lids. The baron was amused. The boy actually began to interest him, and it flashed into his mind that he might be made to serve as the speediest means for bringing him and his mother together. He could overcome his shyness, since it proceeded from nothing but fear. At any rate, it was worth the trial. So when Edgar strolled out of the door to pet, in his child's need of tenderness, the pinkish nostrils of one of the 'bus horses, the baron followed him.

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Edgar was certainly unlucky. The driver chased him away rather roughly. Insulted and bored, he stood about aimlessly again, with a vacant, rather melancholy expression in his eyes. The baron now addressed him.

“Well, young man, how do you like it here?” He attempted a tone of jovial ease.

The child turned fairly purple and looked up in actual alarm, drawing his arms close to his body and twisting and turning in embarrassment. For the first time in his life a stranger was the one to address him and not he the stranger.

“Oh,” he managed to stammer out, choking over the last words, “thank you. I—I like it.”

“You do? I’m surprised,” the baron laughed. “It’s a dull place, especially for a young man like you. What do you do with yourself all day long?”

Edgar was still too confused to give a ready answer. Could it be true that this stranger,

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## *Quick Friendship*

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this elegant gentleman, was trying to pick up a conversation with him—with him, whom nobody had ever before cared a rap about? It made him both shy and proud. He pulled himself together with difficulty.

“I read, and we do a lot of walking. Sometimes we go out driving, mother and I. I am here to get well. I was sick. I must be out in the sunshine a lot, the doctor said.”

Edgar spoke the last with greater assurance. Children are always proud of their ailments. The danger they are in makes them more important, they know, in the eyes of their elders.

“Yes, the sun is good for you. It will tan your cheeks. But you oughtn’t to be standing round the whole day long. A fellow like you ought to be on the go, running, jumping, playing, full of spirits, and up to mischief, too. It strikes me you are too good. With that big fat book under your arm you look as though

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you were always poking in the house. By jingo, when I think of the kind of fellow I was at your age, I used to raise the devil, and every evening I came home with torn knickerbockers. Don't be so good, whatever you are."

Edgar could not help smiling, and the consciousness of his own smile removed his fear. Now he was anxious to say something in reply, but it seemed self-assertive and impudent to answer this affable stranger, who spoke to him in such a friendly way. He never had been forward and was easily abashed, so that now he was in the greatest embarrassment from sheer happiness and shame. He would have liked to continue the conversation, but nothing occurred to him. Luckily the great yellow St. Bernard belonging to the hotel came up and sniffed at both of them and allowed himself to be petted.

"Do you like dogs?" asked the baron.

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## *Quick Friendship*

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“Oh, very much. Grandma has one in her villa at Bains. When we stop there he stays with me the whole time. But that’s only in the summer when we go visiting.”

“We have a lot of dogs at home on our estate, a full two dozen, I believe. If you behave yourself here I’ll make you a present of one, brown with white ears, a pup still. Would you like to have it?”

The child turned scarlet with joy.

“I should say so.”

The words fairly burst from his lips in an access of eagerness. Then he caught himself up and stammered in distress and as if frightened:

“But mother won’t allow me to have a dog. She says she won’t keep a dog in the house. It’s too much of a nuisance.”

The baron smiled. The conversation had at last come round to the mother.

“Is your mother so strict?”

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The child pondered and looked up for an instant as if to find out whether the stranger was to be trusted on such slight acquaintance.

“No,” he finally answered cautiously, “she’s not strict, and since I’ve been sick she lets me do anything I want. Maybe she’ll even let me keep a dog.”

“Shall I ask her?”

“Oh, yes, please do,” Edgar cried delightedly. “If *you* do I’m sure she’ll give in. What does he look like? White ears, you said? Can he do any tricks yet?”

“Yes, all sorts of tricks.” The baron had to smile at the sparkle of Edgar’s eyes. It had been so easy to kindle that light in them.

All at once the child’s constraint dropped away, and all his emotionalism, kept in check till then by fear, bubbled over. In a flash the shy, intimidated child of a minute before turned into a boisterous lad.

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“If only his mother is transformed so quickly,” the baron thought. “If only she shows so much ardor behind her reserve.”

Edgar went at him with a thousand questions.

“What’s the dog’s name?”

“Caro.”

“Caro!” he cried happily, somehow having to answer every word with a laugh of delight, so intoxicated was he with the unexpectedness of having someone take him up as a friend. The baron, amazed at his own quick success, resolved to strike while the iron was hot, and invited the boy to take a walk with him. This put Edgar, who for weeks had been starving for company, into a fever of ecstasy.

During the walk the baron questioned him, as if quite by the way, about a number of apparent trifles, and Edgar in response blurted out all the information he was seeking, telling

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him everything he wanted to know about the family.

Edgar was the only son of a lawyer in the metropolis, who evidently came of a wealthy middle-class Jewish family. By clever, round-about inquiries the baron promptly elicited that Edgar's mother had expressed herself as by no means delighted with her stay in Summering and had complained of the lack of congenial company. He even felt he might infer from the evasive way in which Edgar answered his question as to whether his mother wasn't very fond of his father that their marital relations were none of the happiest. He was almost ashamed at having been able to extract these family secrets from the unsuspecting child, for Edgar, very proud that anything he had to say could interest a grown-up person, fairly pressed confidences upon his new friend. His child's heart beat with pride—the baron had put his arm on his

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## *Quick Friendship*

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shoulder while they were walking—to be seen in such close intimacy with a “man,” and gradually he forgot he was a child and talked quite unconstrainedly, as if to an equal.

From his conversation it was quite clear that he was a bright boy, in fact, a bit too precocious, as are most sickly children who spend much time with their elders, and his likes and dislikes were too marked. He took nothing calmly or indifferently. Every person or thing was discussed with either passionate enthusiasm or a hatred so intense as to distort his face into a mean, ugly look. There was something wild and jerky about his manner, accentuated perhaps by the illness he was just recovering from, which gave his talk the fieriness of fanaticism. His awkwardness seemed to proceed from the painfully suppressed fear of his own passion.

Before the end of half an hour the baron was already holding the boy's throbbing heart

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in his hands. It is so infinitely easy to deceive children, those unsuspecting creatures whose love is so rarely courted. All the baron needed to do was to transport himself back to his own childhood, and the talk flowed quite naturally. Edgar felt himself in the presence of an equal, and within a few minutes had lost all sense of distance between them, and was perfectly at ease, conscious of nothing but bliss at having so unexpectedly found a friend in this lonely place. And what a friend! Forgotten were all his mates in the city where he lived, those little boys with their thin voices and inexperienced chatter. This one hour had almost expunged their faces. All his enthusiasm and passion now belonged to this new, this big friend of his.

On parting the baron invited him to take a walk with him again the next morning. Edgar's heart expanded with pride. And, when from a little distance away the baron waved

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## *Quick Friendship*

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back to him like a real playmate, it was probably the happiest moment in his life. It is so easy to deceive children.

The baron smiled as he looked after the boy dashing away. The go-between had been won. Edgar, he knew, would bore his mother with stories of the wonderful baron and would repeat every word he had said. At this he recalled complacently how cleverly he had woven in some compliments for the mother's consumption. "Your beautiful mother," he had always said. There was not the faintest shadow of doubt in his mind that the communicative boy would never rest until he had brought him and his mother together. No need now to stir a finger in order to shorten the distance between himself and the lovely Unknown. He could dream away idly and feast his eyes on the landscape, for a child's eager hands, he knew, were building the bridge for him to her heart.

## CHAPTER III

### THE TRIO

THE plan, as appeared only an hour later, proved to be excellent. It worked without a hitch. The baron chose to be a little late in entering the dining-room, and when Edgar saw him, he jumped up from his seat and gave him an eager nod and a beatific smile, at the same time pulling his mother's sleeve, saying something to her hastily, and pointing conspicuously to the baron.

His mother reproved him for his demonstrativeness. She blushed and showed genuine discomfort, but could not help yielding to the boy's insistence and gave a glance across at the baron. This the baron instantly seized upon as the pretext for a deferential bow.

The acquaintance was made. The lady had

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## *The Trio*

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to acknowledge his bow. Yet from now on she kept her head bent still lower over her plate and throughout the rest of the meal sedulously avoided looking over at the baron again.

Not so Edgar. Every minute or two he turned his eyes on the baron, and once he even tried to speak to him across the two tables, an impropriety which his mother promptly checked with a severe rebuke. As soon as dinner was over, Edgar was told he must go straight to bed, and an eager whispering began between him and his mother, which resulted in a concession to the boy. He was allowed to go to the baron and say good-night to him. The baron said a few kind words and so set the child's eyes ablaze again.

Here the baron rose and in his adroit way, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, stepped over to the other table and congratulated his neighbor upon her bright, in-

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telligent son. He told her what a pleasant time he had spent with him that morning—Edgar beamed—and then inquired about the boy's health. On this point he asked so many detailed questions that the mother was compelled to reply, and so was drawn irresistibly into a conversation. Edgar listened to it all in a sort of rapturous awe.

The baron gave his name to the lady. The high sound of it, it seemed to him, made an impression on her. At any rate she lost her extreme reserve, though retaining perfect dignity.

In a few minutes she took leave, on account of Edgar's having to go to bed, as she said by way of a pretext.

Edgar protested he was not sleepy and would be happy to stay up the whole night. But his mother remained obdurate and held out her hand by way of good-night to the baron, who shook hands with her most respectfully.

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## *The Trio*

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Edgar did not sleep well that night. A chaos of happiness and childish despair filled his soul. Something new had come to him that day. For the first time he had played a part in the life of adults. In his half-awake state he forgot that he was a child and all at once felt himself a grown man. Brought up an only child and often ailing, he had never had many friends. His parents, who paid little attention to him, and the servants had been the only ones to meet his craving for tenderness.

The power of love is not properly gauged if it is estimated only by the object that inspires it, if the tension preceding it is not taken into account—that gloomy space of disillusionment and loneliness which stretches in front of all the great events of the heart.

In Edgar there had been a heavily fraught, unexpended emotion lying in wait, which now burst out and rushed to meet the first human

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being who seemed to deserve it. He lay in the dark, happy and dazed. He wanted to laugh, but had to cry. For he loved the baron as he had never loved friend, father, mother, or even God. All the immature passion of his ending boyhood wreathed itself about his mental vision of the man whose very name had been unknown to him a few hours before.

He was wise enough not to be disturbed by the peculiar, unexpected way in which the new friendship had been formed. What troubled him was the sense of his own unworthiness and insignificance. "Am I fit company for him?" he plagued himself. "I, a little boy, twelve years old, who has to go to school still and am sent off to bed at night before anyone else? What can I mean to him, what have I to offer him?"

The painful sense of his impotence to show his feelings in some way or other made him most unhappy. On other occasions, when he

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*The Trio*

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had taken a liking for a boy, the first thing he had done was to offer to share his stamps and marbles and jacks. Now such childish possessions, which only the day before had still had vast importance and charm in his eyes, had depreciated in value. They seemed silly. He disdained them. He couldn't offer such things to his new friend. What possible way was there for him to express his feelings? The sense that he was small, only half a being, a mere child of twelve, grew upon him and tortured him more and more. Never before had he so vehemently cursed his childhood, or longed so heartily to wake up in the morning the person he had always dreamed of being, a man, big and strong, grown up like the others.

His restless thoughts were mixed with the first bright dreams of the new world of manhood. Finally he fell asleep with a smile on his lips, but his sleep was constantly broken

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by the anticipation of the next morning's appointment. At seven o'clock he awoke with a start, fearful that he was too late already. He dressed hastily and astonished his mother when he went in to say good-morning because she had always had difficulty getting him out of bed. Before she could question him he was out of her room again.

With only the one thought in his mind, not to keep his friend waiting, he dawdled about downstairs in the hotel, even forgetting to eat breakfast.

At half-past nine the baron came sauntering down the lobby with his easy air and no indication that anything had been troubling *him*. He, of course, had completely forgotten the appointment for a walk, but he acted as though he were quite ready to keep his promise when the boy came rushing at him so eagerly. He took Edgar's arm and paced up and down the lobby with him leisurely. Edgar was radi-

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## *The Trio*

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ant, although the baron gently but firmly refused to start on the walk at once. He seemed to be waiting for something. Every once in a while he gave a nervous glance at one of the various doors. Suddenly he drew himself up. Edgar's mother had entered the hall.

She responded to the baron's greeting and came up to him with a pleasant expression on her face. Edgar had not told her about the walk. It was too precious a thing to talk about. But now the baron mentioned it and she smiled in approval. Then he went on to invite her to come along, and she was not slow in accepting.

That made Edgar sulky. He gnawed at his lips. How provoking of his mother to have come into the lobby just then! The walk belonged to him and him alone. To be sure, he had introduced his friend to his mother, but only out of courtesy. He had not meant to share him with anybody. Something like

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jealousy began to stir in him when he observed the baron's friendliness to his mother.

On the walk the dangerous sense the child had of his importance and sudden rise to prominence was heightened by the interest the two adults showed in him. He was almost the exclusive subject of their conversation. His mother expressed rather hypocritical solicitude on account of his pallor and nervousness, while the baron kept saying it was nothing to worry about and extolled his young "friend's" good manners and pleasant ways.

It was the happiest hour of Edgar's life. Rights were granted him that he had never before been allowed. He was permitted to take part in the conversation without a prompt "keep quiet, Edgar." He could even express bold desires for which he would have been rebuked before. No wonder the deceptive feeling that he was grown up began to flourish in his imagination. In his bright dreams child-

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*The Trio*

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hood already lay behind him like a suit he had outgrown and cast off.

At the mother's invitation, the baron took his midday meal at their table. She was growing friendlier all the time. The vis-à-vis was now a companion, the acquaintanceship a friendship. The trio was in full swing, and the three voices, the woman's, the man's and the child's, mingled in harmony.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ATTACK

THE impatient hunter felt the time had come to creep up on his game. The three-sidedness of the sport annoyed him, and so did the tone of it. To sit there and chat was rather pleasant, but he was after more than mere talk. Social intercourse, with the mask it puts over desire, always, he knew, retards the erotic between man and woman. Words lose their ardor, the attack its fire. Despite their conversation together on indifferent matters, Edgar's mother must never forget his real object, of which, he was quite convinced, she was already aware.

That his efforts to catch this woman were

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## *The Attack*

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not to prove in vain seemed very probable. She was at the critical age when a woman begins to regret having remained faithful to a husband she has never truly loved, and when the purple sunset of her beauty still affords her a final urgent choice between motherliness and womanliness. The life whose questions seem to have been answered long before becomes a problem again, and for the last time the magnetic needle of the will wavers between the hope for an intense love experience and ultimate resignation. The woman has a dangerous decision to confront, whether she will live her own life or that of her children, whether she will be a woman first, or a mother first.

The baron, who was very perspicacious in these matters, thought that he discerned in Edgar's mother this very vacillation between passion to live her own life and readiness to sacrifice her desires. In conversation she always

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omitted to mention her husband. Evidently he satisfied nothing but her bare external needs and not the snobbishness that an aristocratic way of living had excited in her. And as for her son, she knew precious little of the child's soul. A shadow of boredom, wearing the veil of melancholy in her dark eyes, lay over her life and obscured her sensuousness.

The baron resolved to act quickly, yet at the same time to avoid any appearance of haste. Like an angler, who tempts the fish by dangling and withdrawing the bait, he would affect a show of indifference and let himself be courted while he was the one that was actually doing the courting. He would put on an air of haughtiness and bring into sharp relief the difference in their social ranks. There was fascination in the idea of getting possession of that lovely, voluptuous creature simply by stressing his pride, by mere externals, by the use of a high-sounding aristocratic

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## *The Attack*

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name and the adoption of a cold, proud manner.

The chase was already growing hot. He had to be cautious and not show his excitement. So he remained in his room the whole afternoon, filled with the pleasant consciousness of being looked for and missed. But his absence was felt not so much by the woman, upon whom the effect was intended, as by Edgar.

To the wretched child it was simple torture. The whole afternoon he felt absolutely impotent and lost. With the obstinate faithfulness of a boy he waited long, long hours for his friend. To have gone away or done anything by himself would have seemed like a crime against their friendship, and he loafed the time away in the hotel corridors, his heart growing heavier and heavier as each moment passed. After a while his heated imagination began to dwell on a possible accident or an

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## *The Burning Secret*

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insult he might unwittingly have offered his friend. He was on the verge of tears from impatience and anxiety.

So that when the baron came in to dinner in the evening, he received a brilliant greeting. Edgar jumped up and, without paying any attention to his mother's cry or rebuke or the astonishment of the other diners, rushed at the baron and threw his thin little arms about him.

"Where have you been? Where have you been? We've been looking for you everywhere."

The mother's face reddened at hearing herself included in the search.

"*Sois sage, Edgar. Assieds toi,*" she said rather severely. She always spoke French to him, though it by no means came readily to her tongue, and if any but the simplest things were to be said she invariably floundered.

Edgar obeyed and went back to his seat, but kept on questioning the baron.

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## *The Attack*

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“Edgar,” his mother interposed, “don’t forget that the baron can do whatever he wants to do. Perhaps our company bores him.”

Now she included herself, and the baron noted with satisfaction that the rebuke directed to the child was really an invitation for a compliment to herself.

The hunter in him awakened. He was intoxicated, thoroughly excited at having so quickly come upon the right tracks and at seeing the game so close to the muzzle of his gun. His eyes sparkled, his blood shot through his veins. The words fairly bubbled from his lips with no conscious effort on his part. Like all men with pronouncedly erotic temperaments, he did twice as well, was twice himself when he knew a woman liked him, as some actors take fire when they feel that their auditors, the breathing mass of humanity in front of them, are completely under their spell.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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Naturally an excellent raconteur, with great skill in graphic description, he now surpassed himself. Besides, he drank several glasses of champagne, ordered in honor of the new friendship. He told of hunting big game in India, where he had gone at the invitation of an English nobleman. The theme was well chosen. The conversation had necessarily to be about indifferent matters, but this subject, the baron felt, would excite the woman as would anything exotic and unattainable by her.

The one, however, upon whom the greater charm was exercised was Edgar. His eyes glowed with enthusiasm. He forgot to eat or drink and stared at the story-teller as if to snatch the words from his lips with his eyes. He had never expected actually to see a man who in his own person had experienced those tremendous things which he read about in his books—tiger hunts, brown men, Hindus, and

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## *The Attack*

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the terrible Juggernaut, which crushed thousands of men under its wheels. Until then he had thought such men did not really exist and believed in them no more than in fairyland. A certain new and great feeling expanded his chest. He could not remove his eyes from his friend and stared with bated breath at the hands across the table that had actually killed a tiger. Scarcely did he dare to ask a question, and when he ventured to speak it was with a feverish tremor in his voice. His lively imagination drew the picture for each story. He saw his friend mounted high on an elephant caparisoned in purple, brown men to the right and to the left wearing rich turbans, and then suddenly the tiger leaping out of the jungle with gnashing teeth and burying its claws in the elephant's trunk.

Now the baron was telling about something even more interesting, how elephants were caught by a trick. Old, domesticated ele-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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phants were used to lure the young, wild, high-spirited ones into the enclosure. The child's eyes flashed. Then, as though a knife came cutting through the air right down between him and the baron, his mother said, glancing at the clock:

*"Neuf heures. Au lit."*

Edgar turned white. To be sent to bed is dreadful enough to grown children at any time. It is the most patent humiliation in adult company, the proclamation that one is still a child, the stigma of being small and needing a child's sleep. But how much more dreadful at so interesting a moment, when the chance of listening to such wonderful things would be lost.

"Just this one story, mother, just this one story about the elephants."

He was about to plead, but bethought himself quickly of his new dignity. He was a grown-up person. One attempt was all he

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## *The Attack*

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ventured. But that night his mother was peculiarly strict.

“No, it’s late already. Just go up. *Sois sage, Edgar*. I’ll tell you the story over again exactly the way the baron tells it to me.”

Edgar lingered a moment. Usually his mother went upstairs with him. But he wasn’t going to beg her in front of his friend. His childish pride made him want to give his pitiful withdrawal somewhat, at least, the appearance of being voluntary.

“Will you really? Everything? All about the elephants and everything else?”

“Yes, Edgar, everything.”

“To-night still?”

“Yes, yes. But go on, go to bed now.”

Edgar was amazed that he was able to shake hands with the baron and his mother without blushing. The sobs were already choking his throat.

The baron ran his hand good-naturedly

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*The Burning Secret*

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through his hair and pulled it down on his forehead. That brought a forced smile to the boy's tense features. But the next instant he had to hurry to the door, or they would see the great tears well over his eyelids and trickle down his cheeks.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ELEPHANTS

EDGAR'S mother stayed at table with the baron a while longer. But the two no longer spoke of elephants or hunting. An indefinable embarrassment instantly sprang up between them, and a faint sultriness descended upon their conversation. After a time they went out into the hall and seated themselves in a corner.

The baron was more brilliant than ever. The woman was a little heated by her two glasses of champagne, so that the conversation quickly took a dangerous turn. The baron

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## *The Burning Secret*

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was not what is called exactly handsome. He was simply young and had a manly look in his dark-brown, energetic, boyish face, and he charmed her with his fresh, almost ill-bred movements. She liked looking at him at such close range and was no longer afraid to encounter his eyes.

Gradually there crept into his language a boldness which vaguely disconcerted her. It was like a gripping of her body and then a letting go, an intangible sort of desire which sent the blood rushing to her face. The next moment, however, he would laugh again, an easy, unconstrained, boyish laugh, which made his little manifestations of desire seem like joking. Sometimes he said things she felt she ought to object to bluntly, but she was a natural-born coquette, and his trifling audacities only provoked in her the taste for more. She was carried away by his bold gaze, and at length got so far as to try to imitate him, an-

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## *The Elephants*

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swering his looks with little fluttering promises from her own eyes, and giving herself up to him in words and gestures. She permitted him to draw close to her, so that every now and then she felt the warm graze of his breath on her shoulders.

Like all gamblers, the two forgot the passage of time and became so absorbed that they started in surprise when the lights in the hall were turned off at midnight.

The woman jumped up in response to the first impulse of alarm she had felt. In the same moment she realized to what audacious lengths she had ventured. It was not the first time she had played with fire, but now her instincts, all aroused, told her the game had come perilously close to being in earnest. She shuddered inwardly at discovering that she no longer felt quite secure, that something in her was slipping and gliding down into an abyss. Her head whirled with alarm, with slight in-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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toxication from the champagne, and with the ring of the baron's ardent language in her ears. A dull dread came over her. She had experienced the same sort of dread several times before in similar dangerous moments, but it had never so overpowered her. This extreme dizziness was something she had never before experienced.

"Good-night," she said hastily. "See you in the morning again."

She felt like running away, not so much from him as from the danger of the moment and from an odd, novel insecurity she felt within herself.

But the baron held her hand in a tight but gentle grip and kissed it four or five times from the delicate tips of her fingers to her wrist. A little shiver went through her at the graze of his rough mustache on the back of her hand, and her blood ran warm and mounted to her head. Her cheeks glowed.

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## *The Elephants*

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There was a hammering at her temples. A wild unreasoning fear made her snatch her hand away.

“Don’t go, don’t go,” the baron pleaded in a whisper. But she was already gone, the awkwardness of her haste revealing plainly her fright and confusion. She was undergoing the excitement that the baron wanted. She was all confused, one moment in awful dread that the man behind might follow and put his arms round her, and the next instant regretting that he had not done so. In those few seconds the thing might have taken place that she had been dreaming of for years, the great adventure. She had always taken voluptuous delight in creeping up to the very edge of an adventure and then jumping back at the last moment, an adventure of the great and dangerous kind, not a mere fleeting flirtation. But the baron was too proud to push his advantage now, too assured of his victory to take

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## *The Burning Secret*

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this woman like a robber in a moment of weakness and intoxication. A fair sportsman prefers his game to show fight and to surrender quite consciously. The woman could not escape him. The virus, he knew, was already seething in her veins.

She stopped on the landing above and pressed her hand to her throbbing heart. She had to rest a while. Her nerves were snapping. She heaved a great sigh, partly of relief at having escaped a danger, partly of regret. Her emotions were mixed, and all she was vividly conscious of was the whirl of her blood and a faint giddiness. With half-closed eyes she groped her way like a drunken woman to the door and breathed with relief when she felt the cool door-knob in her hand. At last she was safe.

She opened the door softly and the next second started back in fright. Something had moved way back in the dark. In her excited

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## *The Elephants*

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state this was too much, and she was about to cry for help when a very, very sleepy voice came from within, saying:

“Is that you, mother?”

“Goodness gracious! What are you doing here?”

She rushed to the sofa where Edgar was lying curled up trying to keep himself wide awake. She thought the child must be ill and needed attention.

“I waited for you so long, and then I fell asleep.”

“What were you waiting for?”

“You know. To hear about the elephants.”

“Elephants?” As she asked the question Edgar’s mother remembered her promise. She was to tell him all about the elephant hunts and the baron’s other adventures that very night. And so the simple child had crept into her room and in unquestioning faith had waited for her until he had dropped

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## *The Burning Secret*

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asleep. The absurdity of it enraged her, or rather she was angry with herself, and for that reason she wanted to outshriek the tiny whisper of her conscience telling her she had done a shameful wrong.

“Go to bed at once, you nuisance!” she cried.

Edgar stared at her. Why was she so angry? He hadn't done anything wrong. But his very amazement only made her angrier.

“Go to bed at once,” she shouted, in a rage, because she felt how unjust she was to the child.

Edgar went without a word. He was dreadfully sleepy and felt only in a blur that his mother had not kept her promise and that somehow or other he was being treated meanly. Yet he did not rebel. His susceptibilities were dulled by sleepiness. Besides, he was angry with himself for having fallen asleep while waiting.

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*The Elephants*

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“Like a baby,” he said to himself in disgust before dropping off to sleep again.

Since the day before he hated himself for being still a child.

## CHAPTER VI

### SKIRMISHING

THE baron had passed a bad night. It is rather vain to attempt to sleep after an adventure that has been abruptly broken off. Tossing on his bed and starting up out of oppressive dreams, the baron was soon regretting that he had not seized the moment. The next morning when he came down he was still sleepy and cross and in no mood to take up with Edgar, who at sight of him rushed out of a corner and threw his arms about his waist and began to pester him with a thousand questions. The boy was happy to have his big friend to himself once more without having to share him with his mother. He implored him not to tell his stories to her, but only to himself. In spite of her promise she had not

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## *Skirmishing*

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recounted all those wonderful things she had said she would. Edgar assailed the baron with a hundred childish importunities and stormy demonstrations of love. He was so happy at last to have found him again and to be alone with him. He had been waiting for him since early in the morning.

The baron gave the child rough answers. That eternal lying in wait, those silly questions—in short, the boy's unsolicited passion—began to annoy him. He was tired of going about all day long with a puppy of twelve, talking nonsense. All he cared for now was to strike while the iron was hot and get the mother by herself, the very thing it was difficult to do with this child forever inflicting his presence. For the first time the baron cursed his incautiousness in having inspired so much affection, for he saw no chance, on this occasion at least, to rid himself of his too, too devoted friend.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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At any rate it was worth the trial. The baron waited until ten o'clock, the time Edgar's mother had agreed to go out walking with him. He sat beside the boy, paying no attention to his chatter and even glancing through the paper, though every now and then tossing the child a crumb of talk so as not to insult him. When the hour hand was at ten and the minute hand was just reaching twelve, he asked Edgar, as though suddenly remembering something, to do him a favor and run across to the next hotel and find out if his cousin, Count Rosny, had arrived. Delighted at last to be of service to his friend, the unsuspecting child ran off as fast as his legs would carry him, careering down the road so madly that people looked after him in wonder.

Count Rosny, the clerk told him, had not arrived, nor had he even announced his coming. Edgar again made post haste back to bring this information to his friend. But where

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*Skirmishing*

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was his friend? Nowhere in the hall. Up in his room perhaps. Edgar dashed up the stairs and knocked at his door. No answer. He ran down again and searched in the music-room, the café, the verandas, the smoking room. In vain. He hurried to his mother's room to see if she knew anything about the baron. But she was gone, too. When finally, in his despair, he applied to the porter, he was told the two had gone out together a few minutes before.

Edgar waited for their return patiently. He was altogether unsuspecting and felt quite sure that they would come back soon because the baron wanted to hear whether or not his cousin had arrived. However, long stretches of time went by, and gradually uneasiness crept upon him. Ever since the moment when that strange, seductive man had entered his little life, never as yet tinged by suspicion, the child had spent his days in one continual state

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*The Burning Secret*

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of tension and tremulousness and confusion. Upon such delicate organisms as those of children every emotion impresses itself as upon soft wax. Edgar's eyelids began to twitch again, and he was already a shade or two paler.

He waited and waited, patiently, at first, then in wild excitement, on the verge of tears. Yet no suspicion crept into his child's soul. So blindly trustful was he of his wonderful friend that he fancied there must have been some misunderstanding, and he tortured himself fearing he had not executed his commission properly.

But, when they came home at last, how odd that they lingered at the threshold talking gaily without showing the faintest surprise and without, apparently, having missed him very much.

"We went out expecting to meet you, Ed-die," said the baron, forgetting to ask if the

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## *Skirmishing*

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count had arrived. When Edgar, in consternation that they must have been looking for him on the way between the two hotels, eagerly asseverated that he had taken the straight road and questioned them about the direction they had gone, his mother cut him off short with, "All right, Edgar, all right. Children must be seen and not heard."

There, this was the second time, Edgar thought, flushing with anger, that his mother had so horridly tried to make him look small in front of his friend. Why did she do it? Why did she always want to set him down as a child when, he was convinced, he was no longer a child? Evidently she was jealous of his friend and was planning to get him all to herself. Yes, that was it, and it was she who had purposely led the baron the wrong way. But he wouldn't let her treat him like that again, he'd show her. He was going to be spiteful, he wasn't going to say a word to her

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## *The Burning Secret*

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at table, and he would speak only to his friend.

However, it was not so easy to keep quiet as he thought it would be. Things went in a most unanticipated way. Neither his mother nor the baron noticed his attitude of spitefulness. Why, they did not even pay the slightest attention to him, who, the day before, had been the medium of their coming together. They talked over his head and laughed and joked as though he had disappeared under the table. His blood mounted to his head and a lump came into his throat. A horrid sense of his impotence overwhelmed him. Was it his doom to sit there quietly and look on while his mother stole away from him his friend, the one man he loved, while he, Edgar, made no movement in self-defence and used no other weapon than silence? He felt as though he must get up and pound the table with his clenched fists, just to make them take notice of him. But he restrained himself and

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## *Skirmishing*

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merely put down his knife and fork and stopped eating. Even this it was a long time before they observed. It was not until the last course that his mother became conscious that he had not tasted his food and asked him if he were not feeling well.

“Disgusting,” he thought. “That’s all she ever thinks of, whether I’m sick or not. Nothing else about me seems to matter to her.”

He told her shortly that he wasn’t hungry, which quite satisfied her. Nothing, absolutely nothing forced them to pay attention to him. The baron seemed to have forgotten him completely, at least he never addressed a single remark to him. His eyeballs were getting hot with suppressed tears, and finally he had to resort to the childlike device of raising his napkin like a screen to hide the traitorous drops that rolled down his cheeks and salted his lips. When the meal finally came to an end, he drew a sigh of relief.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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During the meal his mother had proposed a drive to an interesting spot in the neighborhood and Edgar had listened with his lips between his teeth. So she was not going to allow him a single moment alone with his friend any more. But now, as they got up from table, came something even worse, and Edgar's anger went over into a fury of hate.

"Edgar," said his mother, "you'll be forgetting everything you learned at school. You had better stay here this afternoon while we're out driving and do a little studying."

He clenched his small fists again. There she was at it again, humiliating him in front of his friend, publicly reminding him that he was still a child who had to go to school and whose presence was merely tolerated by his elders. This time, however, her intentions were altogether too obvious, and Edgar was satisfied to turn away without replying.

"Insulted again," she said, smiling, and then

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## *Skirmishing*

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to the baron, "Do you really think it's so bad for him to spend an hour studying once in a while?"

To this—something in the child's heart congealed—to this the baron, who called himself his friend and who had made fun of him for being a bookworm, made answer that an hour or two really couldn't do any harm.

Was there an agreement between the two? Had they actually allied themselves against him?

"My father," said the boy, his eyes flashing anger, "forbade my studying here. He wants me to get my health back here." Edgar hurled this out with all his pride in his illness, clinging desperately to his father's dictum and his father's authority. It came out like a threat, and to his immense astonishment it took effect, seeming actually to have made both of them uncomfortable, his mother especially, for she turned her eyes aside and

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## *The Burning Secret*

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began to drum on the table nervously with her fingers. For a while there was a painful silence, broken finally by the baron, who said with a forced laugh:

“It’s just as you say, Eddie. I myself don’t have to take examinations any more. I failed in all my examinations long ago.”

Edgar gave no smile, but looked at the baron with a yearning, searching gaze, as if to probe to the innermost of his being. What was taking place in the baron’s soul? Something between him and Edgar had changed, and the child knew not what or why. His eyes wandered unsteadily, in his heart went a little rapid hammer, his first suspicion.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE BURNING SECRET

“WHAT has made them so different?” the child pondered while sitting opposite them in the carriage. “Why don’t they behave toward me as they did at first? Why does mamma avoid my eyes when I look at her? Why does he always try to joke when I’m around and make a silly of himself? They don’t talk to me as they did yesterday or the day before yesterday. Their faces even seem different. Mamma’s lips are so red she must have rouged them. I never saw her do that before. And he keeps frowning as though he were offended. Could I have said anything to annoy them? No, I haven’t said a word. It cannot be on my account that they’re so changed.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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Even their manner toward each other is not the same as it was. They behave as though they had been naughty and didn't dare confess. They don't chat the way they did yesterday, nor laugh. They're embarrassed, they're concealing something. They've got a secret between them that they don't want to tell me. I'm going to find it out. I must, I don't care what happens, I must. I believe I know what it is. It must be the same thing that grown-up people always shut me out from when they talk about it. It's what books speak of, and it comes in operas when the men and women on the stage stand singing face to face with their arms spread out, and embrace, and shove each other away. It must have something to do with my French governess, who behaved so badly with papa and was dismissed. All these things are connected. I feel they are, but I don't know how. Oh, to find it out, at last to find it out, that secret! To possess the key that

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## *The Burning Secret*

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opens all doors! Not to be a child any longer with everything kept hidden from one and always being held off and deceived. Now or never! I will tear it from them, that dreadful secret!"

A deep furrow cut itself between the child's brows. He looked almost old as he sat in the carriage painfully cogitating this great mystery and never casting a single glance at the landscape, which was shading into all the delicate colors of the spring, the mountains in the freshened green of their pines, the valleys in the mistier greens of budding trees, shrubbery and young grass. All he had eyes for were the man and the woman on the seat opposite him, as though, with his hot gaze, as with an angling hook, he could snatch the secret from the shimmering depths of their eyes.

Nothing gives so keen an edge to the intelligence as a passionate suspicion. All the possibilities of an immature mind are developed

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## *The Burning Secret*

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by a trail leading into obscurity. Sometimes it is only a single light door that keeps children out of the world that we call the real world, and a chance puff of wind may blow it open.

Edgar, all at once, felt himself tangibly closer, closer than ever before, to the Unknown, the Great Secret. It was right next to him, still veiled and unriddled, but very near. It excited him, and it was this that lent him his sudden solemnity. Unconsciously he sensed that he was approaching the outer edges of childhood.

The baron and Edgar's mother were both sensible of a dumb opposition in front of them without realizing that it emanated from the child. The presence of a third person in the carriage constrained them, and those two dark glowing orbs opposite acted as a check. They scarcely dared to speak or look up, and it was impossible for them to drop back into the

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## *The Burning Secret*

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light, easy conversational tone of the day before, so entangled were they already in ardent confidences and words suggestive of secret caresses. They would start a subject, promptly come to a halt, say a broken phrase or two, make another attempt, then lapse again into complete silence. Everything they said seemed always to stumble over the child's obstinate silence and fall flat.

The mother was especially oppressed by her son's sullen quiescence. Giving him a cautious glance out of the corners of her eyes, she was startled to observe, for the first time, in the manner Edgar compressed his lips, a resemblance to her husband when he was annoyed. At that particular moment, when she was playing "hide-and-seek" with an adventure, it was more than ordinarily discomfiting to be reminded of her husband. The boy, only a foot or two away, with his dark, restless eyes and that suggestion behind his pale forehead

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## *The Burning Secret*

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of lying in wait, seemed to her like a ghost, a guardian of her conscience, doubly intolerable there in the close quarters of the carriage. Suddenly, for one second, Edgar looked up and met his mother's gaze. Instantly they dropped their eyes in the consciousness that they were spying on each other. Till then each had had implicit faith in the other. Now something had come between mother and child and made a difference. For the first time in their lives they set to observing each other, to separating their destinies, with secret hate already mounting in their hearts, though the feeling was too young for either to admit it to himself.

When the horses pulled up at the hotel entrance, all three were relieved. The excursion had been a failure, each of them felt, though they did not say so. Edgar was the first to get out of the carriage. His mother excused herself for going straight up to her

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## *The Burning Secret*

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room, pleading a headache. She was tired and wanted to be by herself. Edgar and the baron were left alone together.

The baron paid the coachman, looked at his watch, and mounted the steps to the hall, paying no attention to Edgar and passed him with that easy sway of his slim back which had so enchanted the child that he had immediately begun to imitate the baron's walk. The baron brushed past him, right past him. Evidently he had forgotten him and left him to stand there beside the driver and the horses as though he did not belong to him.

Something in Edgar broke in two as the man, whom in spite of everything he still idolized, slighted him like that. A bitter despair filled his heart when the baron left without so much as touching him with his cloak or saying a single word, when he, Edgar, was conscious of having done no wrong. His painfully enforced self-restraint gave way, the too

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## *The Burning Secret*

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heavy burden of dignity that he had imposed upon himself dropped from his narrow little shoulders, and he became the child again, small and humble, as he had been the day before. At the top of the steps he confronted the baron and said in a strained voice, thick with suppressed tears:

“What have I done to you that you don’t notice me any more? Why are you always like this with me now? And mamma, too? Why are you always sending me off? Am I a nuisance to you, or have I done anything to offend you?”

The baron was startled. There was something in the child’s voice that upset him at first, then stirred him to tenderness and sympathy for the unsuspecting boy.

“You’re a goose, Eddie. I’m merely out of sorts to-day. You’re a dear boy, and I really love you.” He tousled Edgar’s hair, yet with averted face so as not to be obliged to see those

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*The Burning Secret*

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great moist, beseeching child's eyes. The comedy he was playing was becoming painful. He was beginning to be ashamed of having trifled so insolently with the child's love. That small voice, quivering with suppressed sobs, cut him to the quick. "Go upstairs now, Eddie. We'll get along together this evening just as nicely as ever, you'll see."

"You won't let mamma send me right off to bed, will you?"

"No, no, I won't, Eddie," the baron smiled. "Just go on up. I must dress for dinner."

Edgar went, made happy for the moment. Soon, however, the hammer began to knock at his heart again. He was years older since the day before. A strange guest, Distrust, had lodged itself in his child's breast.

He waited for the decisive test, at table. Nine o'clock came, and his mother had not yet said a word about his going to bed. Why did she let him stay on just that day of all days,

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## *The Burning Secret*

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she who was usually so exact? It bothered him. Had the baron told her what he had said! He was consumed with regret, suddenly, that he had run after the baron so trustingly. At ten o'clock his mother rose and took leave of the baron, who, oddly, showed no surprise at her early departure and made no attempt to detain her as he usually did. The hammer beat harder and harder at Edgar's breast.

Now he must apply the test with exceeding care. He, too, behaved as though he suspected nothing and followed his mother to the door. Actually, in that second, he caught a smiling glance that travelled over his head straight to the baron and seemed to indicate a mutual understanding, a secret held in common. So the baron had betrayed him! That was why his mother had left so early. He, Edgar, was to be lulled with a sense of security so that he would not get in their way the next day.

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*The Burning Secret*

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“Mean!” he murmured.

“What’s that?” his mother asked.

“Nothing,” he muttered between clenched teeth.

He, too, had his secret. His secret was hate, a great hate for the two of them.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SILENT HOSTILITY

THE tumult of Edgar's conflicting emotions subsided into one smooth, clear feeling of hate and open hostility, concentrated and unadulterated. Now that he was certain of being in their way, the imposition of his presence upon them gave him a voluptuous satisfaction. Always accompanying them with the compressed strength of his enmity, he would goad them into madness. He gloated over the thought. The first to whom he showed his teeth was the baron, when he came downstairs in the morning and said "Hello, Edgar!" with genuine heartiness in his voice. Edgar remained sitting in the easy chair and answered curtly with a hard "G'd morning."

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## *Silent Hostility*

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“Your mother down yet?”

Edgar kept his eyes glued to his newspaper.

“I don’t know.”

The baron was puzzled.

“Slept badly, Eddie?” The baron was counting on a joke to help him over the situation again, but Edgar merely tossed out a contemptuous “No” and continued to study the paper.

“Stupid,” the baron murmured, shrugging his shoulders and walked away. Hostilities had been declared.

Toward his mother Edgar’s manner was cool and polite. When she made an awkward attempt to send him off to the tennis-court, he gave her a quiet rebuff, and his smile and the bitter curl at the corners of his mouth showed that he was no longer to be fooled.

“I’d rather go walking with you, mamma,” he said with assumed friendliness, looking her straight in the eyes. His answer was ob-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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viously not to her taste. She hesitated and seemed to be looking for something.

“Wait for me here,” she decided at length and went into the dining-room for breakfast.

Edgar waited, but his distrust was lively, and his instincts, all astir, extracted a secret hostile intent from everything the baron and his mother now said. Suspicion was beginning to give him remarkable perspicacity sometimes. Instead, therefore, of waiting in the hall, as he had been bidden, he went outside to a spot from which he commanded a view not only of the main entrance but of all the exits from the hotel. Something in him scented deception. He hid himself behind a pile of wood, as the Indians do in the books, and when, about half an hour later, he saw his mother actually coming out of a side door carrying a bunch of exquisite roses and followed by the baron, the traitor, he laughed in glee. They seemed to be gay and full of

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## *Silent Hostility*

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spirits. Were they feeling relieved at having escaped him to be alone with their secret? They laughed as they talked, and turned into the road leading to the woods.

The moment had come. Edgar, as though mere chance had brought him that way, strolled out from behind the woodpile and walked to meet them, with the utmost composure, allowing himself ample time to feast upon their surprise. When they caught sight of him they were quite taken aback, he saw, and exchanged a glance of astonishment. The child advanced slowly, with an assumed nonchalant air, never removing his mocking gaze from their faces.

“Oh, here you are, Eddie. We were looking for you inside,” his mother said finally.

“The shameless liar!” the child thought, but held his lips set hard, keeping back the secret of his hate. The three stood there irresolutely, one watchful of the others.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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“Well, let’s go on,” said the woman, annoyed, but resigned, and plucked one of the lovely roses to bite. Her nostrils were quivering, a sign in her of extreme anger. Edgar stood still, as though it were a matter of indifference to him whether they walked on or not, looked up at the sky, waited for them to start, then followed leisurely. The baron made one more attempt.

“There’s a tennis tournament to-day. Have you ever seen one?”

The baron was not worth an answer any more. Edgar merely gave him a scornful look and pursed his lips for whistling. That was his full reply. His hate showed its bared teeth.

Edgar’s unwished-for presence weighed upon the two like a nightmare. They felt very like convicts who follow their keeper gritting their teeth and clenching their fists in secret. Edgar neither did nor said anything

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## *Silent Hostility*

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out of the way, yet he became, every moment, more unbearable to them, with his watchful glances out of great moist eyes and his dogged sullenness which was like a prolonged growl at any attempt they made at an advance.

“Go on ahead of us,” his mother suddenly snapped, made altogether ill at ease by his intent listening to everything she and the baron were saying. “Don’t be hopping right at my toes. It makes me fidgety.”

Edgar obeyed. But at every few steps he would face about and stand still, waiting for them to catch up if they had lingered behind, letting his gaze travel over them diabolically and enmeshing them in a fiery net of hate, in which, they felt, they were being inextricably entangled. His malevolent silence corroded their good spirits like an acid, his gaze dashed extinguishing gall on their conversation. The baron made no other attempts to court the woman beside him, feeling, infuriatedly, that

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## *The Burning Secret*

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she was slipping away from him because her fear of that annoying, obnoxious child was cooling the passion he had fanned into a flame with so much difficulty. After repeated unsuccessful attempts at a conversation they jogged along the path in complete silence, hearing nothing but the rustling of the leaves and their own dejected footsteps.

There was active hostility now in each of the three. The betrayed child perceived with satisfaction how their anger gathered helplessly against his own little, despised person. Every now and then he cast a shrewd, ironic look at the baron's sullen face and saw how he was muttering curses between gritted teeth and had to restrain himself from hurling them out at him. He also observed with sarcastic glee how his mother's fury was mounting and that both of them were longing for an opportunity to attack him and send him away, or render him innocuous. But he gave them no open-

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## *Silent Hostility*

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ing, the tactics of his hate had been prepared too well in advance and left no spots exposed.

"Let us go back," his mother burst out, feeling she could no longer control herself and that she must do something, if only cry out, under the imposition of this torture.

"A pity," said Edgar quietly, "it's so lovely."

The other two realized the child was making fun of them, but they dared not retort, their tyrant having learned marvellously in two days the supreme art of self-control. Not a quiver in his face betrayed his mordant irony. Without another word being spoken they retraced the long way back to the hotel.

When Edgar and his mother were alone together in her room, her excitement was still seething. She tossed her gloves and parasol down angrily. Edgar did not fail to note these signs and was aware that her electrified nerves would seek to discharge themselves, but he

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## *The Burning Secret*

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courted an outburst and remained in her room on purpose. She paced up and down, seated herself, drummed on the table with her fingers, and jumped up again.

“How untidy you look. You go around filthy. It’s a disgrace. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself—a boy of your age!”

Without a word of opposition Edgar went to his mother’s toilet table and washed and combed himself. His cold, obdurate silence and the ironic quiver of his lips drove her to a frenzy. Nothing would have satisfied her so much as to give him a sound beating.

“Go to your room,” she screamed, unable to endure his presence a second longer. Edgar smiled and left the room.

How the two trembled before him! How they dreaded every moment in his presence, the merciless grip of his eyes! The worse they felt the more he gloated, and the more challenging became his satisfaction. Edgar

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## *Silent Hostility*

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tortured the two defenceless creatures with the almost animal cruelty of children. The baron, because he had not given up hope of playing a trick on the lad and was thinking of nothing but the goal of his desires, could still contain his anger, but Edgar's mother was losing her hold upon herself and kept constantly slipping. It was a relief to her to be able to shriek at him.

"Don't play with your fork," she cried at table. "You're an ill-bred monkey. You don't deserve to be in the company of grown-up people."

Edgar smiled, with his head tipped a trifle to one side. He knew his mother's outburst was a sign of desperation and took pride in having made her betray herself. His manner and glance were now as composed as a physician's. In previous days he might have answered back rudely so as to annoy her. But hate teaches many things, and quickly. How

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## *The Burning Secret*

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he kept quiet, and still kept quiet, and still kept quiet, until his mother, under the pressure of his silence, began to scream. She could stand it no longer. When they rose from table and Edgar with his matter-of-course air of attachment proceeded to follow her and the baron, her pent-up anger suddenly burst out. She cast prudence to the winds and let out the truth. Tortured by his crawling presence she reared like a horse pestered by crawling flies.

“Why do you keep tagging after me like a child of three? I don’t want you around us all the time. Children should not always be with their elders. Please remember that. Spend an hour or two by yourself for once. Read something, or do whatever you want. Leave me alone. You make me nervous with your creepy ways and that disgusting hang-dog air of yours!”

He had wrested it from her at last—the confession! He smiled, while the baron and

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## *Silent Hostility*

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his mother seemed embarrassed. She swung about, turning her back, and was about to leave, in a fury with herself for having admitted so much to her little son, when Edgar's voice came, saying coolly:

"Papa does not want me to be by myself here. He made me promise not to be wild, and to stay with you." Edgar emphasized "Papa," having noticed on the previous occasion when he used the word that it had had a paralyzing effect upon both of them. In some way or other, therefore, he inferred, his father must be implicated in this great mystery and must have a secret power over them, because the very mention of him seemed to frighten and distress them. They said nothing this time either. They laid down their arms.

The mother left the room with the baron, and Edgar followed behind, not humbly like a servitor, but hard, strict, inexorable, like a guard over prisoners, rattling the chains

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## *The Burning Secret*

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against which they strained in vain. Hate had steeled his child's strength. He, the ignorant one, was stronger than the two older people whose hands were held fast by the great secret.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE LIARS

TIME was pressing. The baron's holiday would soon come to an end, and the few days that remained must be exploited to the full. There was no use, both he and Edgar's mother felt, trying to break down the excited child's pertinacity. So they resorted to the extreme measure of disgraceful evasion and flight, merely to escape for an hour or two from under his yoke.

"Please take these letters and have them registered at the post-office," his mother said to Edgar in the hall, while the baron was outside ordering a cab. Edgar, remembering that until then his mother had sent the hotel

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## *The Burning Secret*

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boys on her errands, was suspicious. Were they hatching something against him? He hesitated.

“Where will you wait for me?”

“Here.”

“For sure?”

“Yes.”

“Now be sure to. Don’t leave before I come back. You’ll wait right here in the hall, won’t you?” In the consciousness of his superiority he had adopted a commanding tone with his mother. Many things had changed since the day before yesterday.

At the door he encountered the baron, to whom he spoke for the first time in two days.

“I am going to the post-office to register these letters. My mother is waiting for me. Please do not go until I come back.”

The baron hastened past him.

“All right. We’ll wait.”

Edgar ran at top speed to the post-office,

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## *The Liars*

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where he had to wait while a man ahead of him asked a dozen silly questions. Finally his turn came, and at last he was free to run back to the hotel, which he reached just in time to see the couple driving off. He turned rigid with anger, and had the impulse to pick up a stone and throw it at them. So they had escaped him after all, but by what a mean, contemptible lie! He had discovered the day before that his mother lied, but that she could so wantonly disregard a definite, expressed promise, shattered his last remnant of confidence. He could not understand life at all any more, now that he realized that the words which he had thought clothed a reality were nothing more than bursting bubbles. But what a dreadful secret it must be that drove grown-up people to such lengths, to lie to him, a child, and to steal away like criminals! In the books he had read, men deceived and murdered one another for money, power,

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## *The Burning Secret*

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empire, but what was the motive here? What were his mother and the baron after? Why did they hide from him? What were they, with their lies, trying to conceal? He racked his brain for answers to the riddle. Vaguely he divined that this secret was the bolt which, when unlocked, opened the door to let out childhood, and to master it meant to be grown up, to be a man at last. Oh, to know what it was! But he could no longer think clearly. His rage at their having escaped him was like a fire that sent scorching smoke into his eyes and kept him from seeing.

He ran to the woods and in the nick of time reached a quiet dark spot, where no one could see him, and burst into tears.

“Liars! Dogs! Mean—mean—mean!”

He felt he must scream the words out to relieve himself of his frenzy. All the pent-up rage, impatience, annoyance, curiosity, impotence, and the sense of betrayal of the last few

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## *The Liars*

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days, which he had suppressed in the fond belief that he was an adult and must behave like an adult, now gushed from him in a fit of weeping and sobbing. It was the final crying spell of his childhood. For the last time he was giving in to the bliss of weeping like a woman. In that moment of uncontrolled fury his tears washed away his whole childhood, trust, love, credulity, respect.

The lad who returned to the hotel was different from the child that had left it. He was cool and level-headed. He went first to his room and washed his face carefully so that the two should not enjoy the triumph of seeing the traces of his tears. Then he planned his strategy and waited patiently, without the least agitation.

There happened to be a good many guests in the hall when the carriage pulled up at the door. Two gentlemen were playing chess, a few others were reading their papers, and a

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## *The Burning Secret*

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group of ladies sat together talking. Edgar sat among them quietly, a trifle pale, with wavering glances. When his mother and the baron appeared in the doorway, rather embarrassed at encountering him so soon, and began to stammer out their excuses prepared in advance, he confronted them calmly, and said to the baron in a tone of challenge:

“I have something to say to you, sir.”

“Very well, later, a little later.”

Edgar, pitching his voice louder and enunciating every word clearly and distinctly, said, so that everyone in the hall could hear:

“No, now. You behaved like a villain. You knew my mother was waiting for me, and you——”

“Edgar!” cried his mother, feeling all glances upon her, and swooped down on him. But Edgar, realizing that she wanted to shout him down, screamed at the top of his voice:

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## *The Liars*

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“I say again, in front of everybody, you lied, you lied disgracefully. It was a dirty trick.”

The baron went white, the people stared, some laughed. The mother clutched the boy, who was quivering with excitement, and stammered out hoarsely:

“Go right up to your room, or I’ll give you a beating right here in front of everybody.”

But Edgar had already calmed down. He regretted he had been so violent and was discontented with himself that he had not coolly challenged the baron as he had intended to do. But his anger had been stronger than his will. He turned and walked to the staircase leisurely, with an air of perfect composure.

“You must excuse him,” the mother still went on, stammering, confused by the rather wicked glances fixed upon her, “he’s a nervous child, you know.”

She was afraid of nothing so much as a scandal, and she knew she must assume innocence.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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Instead, therefore, of taking to instant flight, she went up to the desk and asked for her mail and made several other inquiries before rustling up the stairs as though nothing had happened. But behind her, she was quite conscious, she had left a wake of whispered comment and suppressed giggling. On the first landing she hesitated, the rest of the steps she mounted more slowly. She was always unequal to a serious situation and was afraid of the inevitable explanation with Edgar. She was guilty, she could not deny that, and she dreaded the child's curious gaze, which paralyzed her and filled her with uncertainty. In her timidity she decided to try gentleness, because in a battle the excited child, she knew, was the stronger.

She turned the knob gently. Edgar was sitting there quiet and cool, his eyes, turned upon her at her entrance, not even betraying curiosity. He seemed to be very sure of himself.

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## *The Liars*

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“Edgar,” she began, in the motherliest of tones, “what got into you? I was ashamed of you. How can one be so ill-bred, especially a child to a grown-up person? You must ask the baron’s pardon at once.”

“I will not.”

As he spoke Edgar was looking out of the window, and his words might have been meant for the trees. His sureness was beginning to astonish his mother.

“Edgar, what’s the matter with you? You’re so different from what you were. You used to be a good, sensible child with whom a person could reason. And all at once you act as though the devil had got into you. What have you got against the baron? You liked him so much at first. He was so nice to you.”

“Yes, because he wanted to make your acquaintance.”

“Nonsense. How can you think anything like that?”

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## *The Burning Secret*

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The child flared up.

"He's a liar. He's false through and through. Whatever he does is calculated and common. He wanted to get to know you, so he made friends with me and promised me a dog. I don't know what he promised you, or why he's so friendly with you, but he wants something of you, too, mamma, positively he does. If he didn't, he wouldn't be so polite and friendly. He's a bad man. He lies. Just take a good look at him once, and see how false his eyes are. Oh, I hate him!"

"Edgar, how can you talk like that!" She was confused and did not know what to reply. The feeling stirred in her that the child was right.

"Yes, he's a bad man, you can't make me believe he isn't. You must see he is. Why is he afraid of me? Why does he try to keep out of my way? Because he knows I can see through him and his badness."

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## *The Liars*

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“How can you talk like that?” she kept protesting feebly. Her brain seemed to have dried up.

All of a sudden a great fear came upon her, whether of the baron or the boy, she knew not. Edgar saw that his warning was taking effect, and he was lured on to win her over to his side and have a comrade in his hate and hostility toward the baron. He went over to her gently, put his arms about her, and said in a voice flattering with the excitement quivering in it:

“Mamma, you yourself must have noticed that it isn’t anything good that he wants. He’s made you quite different. You’re the one that’s changed, not I. He set you against me just to have you to himself. I’m sure he means to deceive you. I don’t know what he promised you, but whatever it is, he doesn’t intend to keep his promise. You ought to be careful of him. A man who will lie to one person

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will lie to another person, too. He's a bad, bad man. You mustn't trust him."

Edgar's voice, soft and almost tearful, seemed to speak out of her own heart. Since the day before an uncomfortable feeling had been rising in her which told her the same, with growing emphasis. But she was ashamed to tell her own child he was right, and she took refuge, as so many do when under the stress of overwhelming feeling, in rude rejoinder. She straightened herself up.

"Children don't understand such things. You have no right to mix into such matters. You must behave yourself. That's all."

Edgar's face congealed again.

"Very well. I have warned you."

"Then you won't ask the baron's pardon?"

"No."

They stood confronting each other, and the mother knew her authority was at stake.

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## *The Liars*

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“Then you will stay up here and eat by yourself, and you won’t be allowed to come to table and sit with us until you have asked his pardon. I’ll teach you manners. You won’t budge from this room until I give you permission to, do you hear?”

Edgar smiled. That cunning smile seemed to be part of his lips now. Inwardly he was angry at himself. How foolish to have let his heart run away with him again and to have tried to warn her, the liar.

His mother rustled out without giving him another glance. That caustic gaze of his frightened her. The child had become an absolute annoyance to her since she realized that he had his eyes open and said the very things she did not want to know or hear. It was uncanny to have an inner voice, her conscience, dissevered from herself, incorporated in her child, going about as her child, warning her and making fun of her. Until then the child

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## *The Burning Secret*

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had stayed alongside of her life, as an ornament, a toy, a thing to love and have confidence in, now and then perhaps a burden, but always something that floated along in the same current as her own life, keeping even pace with it. For the first time this something reared itself up and opposed her will. A feeling akin to hate mingled itself in her thoughts of her child now. And yet, as she was descending the stairs, a little tired, childish voice came from her own breast, saying, "You ought to be careful of him."

On one of the landings was a mirror. The gleam of it struck her eyes, and she paused to scrutinize herself questioningly. She looked deeper and deeper into her own face until the lips of her image parted in a light smile and formed themselves as if to utter a dangerous word. The voice within her was still speaking, but she threw back her shoulders as though to shake off all those invisible thoughts,

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*The Liars*

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gave her reflection in the glass a bright glance, caught up her skirt, and descended the rest of the stairs with the determined manner of a player who has tossed his last coin down on the table.

## CHAPTER X

### ON THE TRAIL

THE waiter, after serving Edgar with dinner in his room, closed and locked the door behind him. The child started up in a rage. His mother's doings! She must have given orders for him to be locked in like a vicious beast.

"What's going on downstairs," he brooded grimly, "while I am locked in up here? What are they talking about, I wonder? Is the mystery taking place, and am I missing it? Oh, this secret that I scent all around me when I am with grown-ups, this thing that they shut me out from at night, and that makes them lower their voices when I come upon them unawares, this great secret that has been near me for days, close at hand, yet still out of

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*On the Trail*

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reach. I've done everything to try to get at it."

Edgar recalled the time when he had pilfered books from his father's library and had read them, and found they contained the mystery, though he could not understand it. There must be some sort of seal, he concluded, either in himself or in the others that had first to be removed before the mystery could be fathomed. He also recalled how he had begged the servant-girl to explain the obscure passages in the books and she had only laughed at him.

"Dreadful," he thought, "to be a child, full of curiosity, and yet not to be allowed even to ask for information, always to be ridiculed by the grown-ups, as if one were a stupid good-for-nothing. But never mind, I'm going to find it out, and very soon, I feel sure I will. Already part of it is in my hands, and I mean not to let go till I hold the whole of it."

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## *The Burning Secret*

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He listened to find out if anyone were coming to the room. Outside, the trees were rustling in a strong breeze, which caught up the silvery mirror of the moonlight and dashed it in shivering bits through the network of the branches.

“It can’t be anything good that they intend to do, else they wouldn’t have used such mean little lies to get me out of their way. Of course, they’re laughing at me, the miserable creatures, because they’re rid of me at last. But I’ll be the one to laugh next. How stupid of me to allow myself to be locked in this room and give them a moment to themselves, instead of sticking to them like a burr and watching their every move. I know the grown-ups are always incautious, and *they* will be giving themselves away, too. Grown-ups think we’re still babies and always go to sleep at night. They forget we can pretend to be asleep and can go on listening, and we can

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## *On the Trail*

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make out we're stupid when we're really very bright."

Edgar smiled to himself sarcastically when at this point his thoughts reverted to the birth of a baby cousin. The family in his presence had pretended to be surprised, and he had known very well they were not surprised, because for weeks he had heard them, at night when they thought he was asleep, discussing the coming event. And he resolved to fool his mother and the baron in the same way.

"Oh, if only I could peep through the key-hole and watch them while they fancy they're alone and safe. Perhaps it would be a good idea to ring, and the boy would come and open the door and ask what I want. Or I could make a terrible noise smashing things, and then they'd unlock the door and I'd slip out."

On second thought he decided against either plan, as incompatible with his pride. No one should see how contemptibly he had been

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## *The Burning Secret*

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treated, and he would wait till the next day.

From beneath his window came a woman's laugh. Edgar started. Perhaps it was his mother laughing. She had good cause to laugh and make fun of the helpless little boy who was locked up when he was a nuisance and thrown into a corner like a bundle of rags. He leaned, circumspectly out of the window and looked. No, it wasn't his mother, but one of a group of gay girls teasing a boy.

In looking out Edgar observed that his window was not very high above the ground, and instantly it occurred to him to jump down and go spy on his mother and the baron. He was all fire with the joy of his resolve, feeling that now he had the great secret in his grasp. There was no danger in it. No people were passing by—and with that he had jumped out. Nothing but the light crunch of the gravel under his feet to betray his action.

In these two days, stealing around and spy-

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## *On the Trail*

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ing had become the delight of his life, and intense bliss, mingled with a faint tremor of alarm, filled him now as he tiptoed around the outside of the hotel, carefully avoiding the lights. He looked first into the dining-room. Their seats were empty. From window to window he went peeping, always outside the hotel for fear if he went inside he might run up against them in one of the corridors. Nowhere were they to be seen, and he was about to give up hope when he saw two shadows emerge from a side entrance—he shrank and drew back into the dark—and his mother and her inseparable escort came out.

In the nick of time, he thought. What were they saying? He couldn't hear, they were talking in such low voices and the wind was making such an uproar in the trees. His mother laughed. It was a laugh he had never before heard from her, a peculiarly sharp, nervous laugh, as though she had suddenly

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## *The Burning Secret*

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been tickled. It made a curious impression on the boy and rather startled him.

“But if she laughs,” he thought, “it can’t be anything dangerous, nothing very big and mighty that they are concealing from me.” He was a trifle disillusioned. “Yet, why were they leaving the hotel? Where were they going alone together in the night?”

Every now and then great drifts of clouds obscured the moon, and the darkness was then so intense that one could scarcely see the white road at one’s feet, but soon the moon would emerge again and robe the landscape in a sheet of silver. In one of the moments when the whole countryside was flooded in brilliance Edgar saw the two silhouettes going down the road, or rather one silhouette, so close did they cling together, as if in terror. But where were they going? The fir-trees groaned, the woods were all astir, uncannily, as though from a wild chase in their depths.

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## *On the Trail*

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“I will follow them,” thought Edgar. “They cannot hear me in all this noise.”

Keeping to the edge of the woods, in the shadow, from which he could easily see them on the clear white road, he tracked them relentlessly, blessing the wind for making his footsteps inaudible and cursing it for carrying away the sound of their talk. It was not until he heard what they said that he could be sure of learning the secret.

The baron and his companion walked on without any misgivings. They felt all alone in the wide resounding night and lost themselves in their growing excitement, never dreaming that on the high edges of the road, in the leafy darkness, every movement of theirs was being watched, and a pair of eyes was clutching them in a wild grip of hate and curiosity.

Suddenly they stood still, and Edgar, too, instantly stopped and pressed close up against

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## *The Burning Secret*

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a tree, in terror that they might turn back and reach the hotel before him, so that his mother would discover his room was empty and learn that she had been followed. Then he would have to give up hope of ever wresting the secret from them. But the couple hesitated. Evidently there was a difference of opinion between them. Fortunately at that moment the moon was shining undimmed by clouds, and he could see everything clearly. The baron pointed to a side-path leading down into the valley, where the moonlight descended, not in a broad flood of brilliance, but only in patches filtering here and there through the heavy foliage.

“Why does he want to go down there?” thought Edgar.

His mother, apparently, refused to take the path, and the baron was trying to persuade her. Edgar could tell from his gestures that he was talking emphatically. The child was

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## *On the Trail*

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alarmed. What did this man want of his mother? Why did he attempt—the villain!—to drag her into the dark? From his books, to him the world, came live memories of murder and seduction and sinister crime. There, he had it, the baron meant to murder her. That was why he had kept him, Edgar, at a distance, and enticed her to this lonely spot. Should he cry for help? Murder! He wanted to shriek, but his throat and lips were dry and no sound issued from his mouth. His nerves were tense as a bow-string, he could scarcely stand upright on his shaking knees, and he put out his hand for support, when, crack, crack! a twig snapped in his grasp.

At the sound of the breaking twig the two turned about in alarm and stared into the darkness. Edgar clung to the tree, his little body completely wrapped in obscurity, quiet as death. Yet they seemed to have been frightened.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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"Let's go home," he could now hear his mother say anxiously, and the baron, who, evidently, was also upset, assented. Pressed close against each other, they walked back very slowly. Their embarrassment was Edgar's good fortune. He got down on all fours and crept, tearing his hands and clothes on the brambles, through the undergrowth to the turn of the woods, from where he ran breathlessly back to the hotel and up the stairs to his room. Luckily the key was sticking on the outside, and in one second he was in his room lying on the bed, where he had to rest a few moments to give his pounding heart a chance to quiet down. After two or three minutes he got up and looked out of the window to await their return.

They must have been walking very slowly indeed. It took them an eternity. Circumspectly he peeped out of the shadowed frame. There, at length, they came at a snail's pace,

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## *On the Trail*

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the moonlight shining on their clothes. They looked like ghosts in the greenish shimmer, and the delicious horror came upon him again whether it really might have been a murder, and what a dreadful catastrophe he had averted by his presence. He could clearly see their faces, which looked chalky in the white light. His mother had an expression of rapture that in her was strange to him, while the baron looked hard and dejected. Probably because he had failed in carrying out his purpose.

They were very close to the hotel now, but it was not until they reached the steps that their figures separated from each other. Would they look up? Edgar waited eagerly. No.

“They have forgotten all about me,” he thought wrathfully, and then, in triumph, “but I haven’t forgotten you. You think I am asleep or non-existent, but you’ll find out

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*The Burning Secret*

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you're mistaken. I'll watch every step you take until I have got the secret out of you, you villain, the dreadful secret that keeps me awake nights. I'll tear the strings that tie you two together. I am not going to go to sleep."

As the couple entered the doorway, their shadows mingled again in one broad band that soon dwindled and disappeared. And once more the space in front of the hotel lay serene in the moonlight, like a meadow of snow.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE SURPRISE ATTACK

EDGAR moved away from the window, breathing heavily, in a shiver of horror. A gruesome mystery of this sort had never touched his life before, the bookish world of thrilling adventure, excitement, deception and murder having always belonged to the same realm as the wonderland of fairy tales, the realm of dreams, far away, in the unreal and unattainable. Now he was plunged right into the midst of this fascinatingly awful world, and his whole being quivered deliriously. Who was this mysterious being who had stepped into his quiet life? Was he really a murderer? If not, why did he always try to drag his mother to a remote, dark spot?

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## *The Burning Secret*

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Something dreadful, Edgar felt certain, was about to happen. He did not know what to do. In the morning he would surely write or telegraph his father—or why not that very moment? His mother was not in her room yet, but was still with that horrid person.

The outside of the door to Edgar's room was hung with a portière, and he opened his door softly now, closed it behind him, and stuck himself between the door and the portière, listening for his mother's steps in the corridor, determined not to let her stay by herself a single instant.

The corridor, at this midnight hour, was quiet and empty and lighted faintly by a single gas jet. The minutes stretched themselves into hours, it seemed, before he heard cautious footsteps coming up the stairs. He strained his ears to listen. The steps did not move forward with the quick, regular beat of someone making straight for his room, but sounded hes-

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## *The Surprise Attack*

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itating and dragging as though up a steep, difficult climb. Edgar also caught the sound of whispering, a pause, then whispering again. He was a quiver with excitement. Was it both of them coming up together? Was the creature still sticking to her? The whispering was too low and far away for him to catch what they were saying. But the footsteps, though slowly and with pauses between, were drawing nearer. And now he could hear the baron's voice—oh, how he hated the sound of it!—saying something in a low, hoarse tone, which he could not get, and then his mother answering as though to ward something off:

“No, no, not tonight!”

Edgar's excitement rose to fever heat. As they came nearer he would be bound to catch everything they said. Each inch closer that they drew was like a physical hurt in his breast, and the baron's voice, how ugly it

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## *The Burning Secret*

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seemed, that greedy, grasping disgusting voice.

“Don’t be cruel. You were so lovely this evening.”

“No, no, I mustn’t. I can’t. Let me go.”

There was such alarm in his mother’s voice that the child was terrified. What did the baron want her to do? Why was she afraid?

They were quite close up to him now, apparently right in front of the portière. A foot or two away from them was he, trembling, invisible, with a bit of drapery for his only protection.

Edgar heard his mother give a faint groan, as though her powers of resistance were weakening.

But what was that? Edgar could hear that they had passed his mother’s door and had kept on walking down the corridor. Where was he dragging her off to? Why was she not replying any more? Had he stuffed his hand-

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## *The Surprise Attack*

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kerchief into her mouth and was he squeezing her throat?

Wild with this thought, Edgar pushed the portière aside and peeped out at the two figures in the dim corridor. The baron had his arm round the woman's waist and was forcing her along gently, evidently with little resistance from her. He stopped at his own door.

"He wants to drag her in and commit the foul deed," thought the child, and dashing the portière aside he rushed down the hall upon them.

His mother screamed; something came leaping at her out of the dark, and she seemed to fall in a faint. The baron held her up with difficulty. The next instant he felt a little fist dealing him a blow that smashed his lips against his teeth, and a little body clawing at him catlike. He released the terrified woman, who quickly made her escape, and,

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## *The Burning Secret*

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without knowing against whom, he struck out blindly.

The child knew he was the weaker of the two, yet he never yielded. At last, at last the great moment had come when he could unburden himself of all his betrayed love and accumulated hate. With set lips and a look of frenzy on his face he pounded away at the baron with his two small fists.

By this time the baron had recognized his assailant. He, too, was primed with hate of the little spy who had been dogging him and interfering with his sport, and he hit back, striking out blindly. Edgar groaned once or twice, but did not let go, and did not cry for help. They wrestled a fraction of a minute in the dark corridor grimly and sullenly without the exchange of a single word. But pretty soon the baron came to his senses and realizing how absurd was this duel with a half-grown boy he caught hold of Edgar to

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## *The Surprise Attack*

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throw him off. But Edgar, feeling his muscles weakening and conscious that the next moment he would be beaten, snapped, in a fury, at the strong, firm hand gripping at the nape of his neck. The baron could not restrain a slight outcry, and let go of Edgar, who seized the opportunity to run to his room and draw the bolt.

The midnight struggle had lasted no more than a minute. No one in any of the rooms along the corridor had caught a sound of it. Everything was silent, wrapped in sleep.

The baron wiped his bleeding hand with his handkerchief and peered into the dark uneasily to make sure no one had been watching or listening. All he saw was the one gas jet winking at him, he thought, sarcastically.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE TEMPEST

EDGAR woke up the next morning dazed, wondering whether it had not been a horrid dream, and with the sickly feeling that hangs on after a nightmare, his head leaden and his body like a piece of wood. It was only after a minute or so that he realized with a sort of alarm that he was still in his day clothes. He jumped out of bed and went to look at himself in the mirror. The image of his own pale, distorted face, with his hair all ruffled and a red, elongated swelling on his forehead, made him recoil with a shudder. It brought back to him the actuality painfully. He recalled the details of the battle in the corri-

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## *The Tempest*

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dor, and his rushing back to his room and throwing himself on to the bed dressed. He must have fallen asleep thus and dreamed everything over again, only worse and mingled with the warmish smell of fresh flowing blood.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel beneath his window, voices rose like invisible birds, and the sun shone deep into the room. "It must be very late," he thought, glancing at his watch. But the hands pointed to midnight. In the excitement of the day before he had forgotten to wind it up. This uncertainty, this hanging suspended in time, disturbed him, and his sense of disgust was increased by his confusion of mind as to what had actually occurred. He dressed quickly and went downstairs, a vague sense of guilt in his heart.

In the breakfast-room his mother was sitting at their usual table, alone. Thank goodness, his enemy was not present. Edgar would not have to look upon that hateful face of his.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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And yet, as he went to the table, he was by no means sure of himself.

“Good morning,” he said.

His mother made no reply, nor even so much as glanced up, but kept her eyes fixed in a peculiarly rigid stare on the view from the window. She looked very pale, her eyes were red-rimmed, and there was that quivering of her nostrils which told so plainly how wrought up she was. Edgar bit his lips. Her silence bewildered him. He really did not know whether he had hurt the baron very much or whether his mother had any knowledge at all of their encounter. The uncertainty plagued him. But her face remained so rigid that he did not even attempt to look up for fear that her eyes, now hidden behind lowered lids, might suddenly raise their curtains and pop out at him. He sat very still, not daring to make the faintest sound, and raising the cup to his lips and putting it back

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## *The Tempest*

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on the saucer with the utmost caution, and casting furtive glances, from time to time, at his mother's fingers, which played with her spoon nervously and seemed, in the way they were bent, to show a secret anger.

For a full quarter of an hour he sat at the table in an oppressive expectancy of something that never came. Not a single word from her to relieve his tension. And now as his mother rose, still without any sign of having noticed his presence, he did not know what to do, whether to remain sitting at the table or to go with her. He decided upon the latter, and followed humbly, though conscious how ridiculous was his shadowing of her now. He reduced his steps so as to fall behind, and she, still studiously refraining from noticing him, went to her room. When Edgar reached her door he found it locked.

What had happened? He was at his wits' end. His assurance of the day before had de-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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served him. Had he done wrong, after all, in attacking the baron? And were they preparing a punishment for him or a fresh humiliation? Something must happen, he was positive, something dreadful, very soon.

Upon him and his mother lay the sultriness of a brewing tempest. They were like two electrified poles that would have to discharge themselves in a flash. And for four solitary hours the child dragged round with him, from room to room, the burden of this premonition, until his thin little neck bent under the invisible yoke, and by midday it was a very humble little fellow that took his seat at table.

“How do you do?” he ventured again, feeling he had to rend this silence, ominous as a great black storm cloud. But still his mother made no response, keeping her gaze fixed beyond him.

Edgar, in renewed alarm, felt he was in the presence of a calculated, concentrated anger

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## *The Tempest*

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such as he had never before encountered. Until then his mother's scoldings had been outbursts of nervousness rather than of ill feeling and soon melted into a mollifying smile. This time, however, he had, as he sensed, brought to the surface a wild emotion from the deeps of her being, and this powerful something that he had evoked terrified him. He scarcely dared to eat. His throat was parched and knotted into a lump.

His mother seemed not to notice what was passing in her son, but when she got up she turned, with a casual air, and said:

“Come up to my room afterwards, Edgar, I have something to say to you.”

Her tone was not threatening, but so icy that Edgar felt as though each word were like a link in an iron chain being laid round his neck. His defiance had been crushed out of him. Silently, with a hang-dog air, he followed her up to her room.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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In the room she prolonged his agony by saying nothing for several minutes, during which he heard the striking of the clock, and outside a child laughing, and within his own breast his heart beating like a trip-hammer. Yet she, too, could not be feeling so very confident of herself either, because she kept her eyes averted and even turned her back while speaking to him.

“I shall say nothing to you about the way you behaved yesterday. It was unpardonable, and it makes me feel ashamed to think of it. You have to suffer the consequences now of your own conduct. All I mean to say to you is that this is the last time you will be allowed to associate with your elders. I have just written to your father that either you must be put under a tutor or sent to a boarding-school where you will be taught manners. I sha’n’t be bothered with you any more.”

Edgar stood with bowed head, feeling that

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## *The Tempest*

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this was only the preliminary, a threat of the real thing coming, and he waited uneasily for the sequel.

“You will ask the baron’s pardon.” Edgar gave a start, but his mother would not be interrupted. “The baron left to-day, and you will write him a letter which I shall dictate.” Edgar again made a movement, which his mother firmly disregarded. “No protestations. Here is the paper, and here are the pen and the ink. Sit down.”

Edgar looked up. Her eyes were steely with an inflexible determination. This hardness and composure in his mother were quite new and strange. He was frightened, and seated himself at the desk, keeping his face bent low.

“The date—upper right-hand corner. Have you written it? Space. Dear Sir, colon. Next line. I have just learned to my regret—got that?—to my regret that you have already

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## *The Burning Secret*

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left Summering. Two m's in Summering. And so I must do by letter what I had intended to do in person, that is—faster, Edgar, you don't have to draw each letter—beg your pardon for what I did yesterday. As my mother told you, I am just convalescing from a severe illness and am very excitable. On account of my condition, I often exaggerate things and the next moment I am sorry for it.”

The back bent over the desk straightened up. Edgar turned in a flash. His defiance had leapt into life again.

“I will not write that. It isn't true.”

“Edgar!”

“It is not true. I haven't done anything that I should be sorry for. I haven't done anything bad that I need ask anybody's pardon for. I simply came to your rescue when you called for help.”

Every drop of blood left her lips, her nostrils widened.

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## *The Tempest*

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“I called for help? You’re crazy.”

Edgar got angry and jumped up from his chair.

“Yes, you did call for help, in the corridor, when he caught hold of you. You said, ‘Let me go, let me go,’ so loud that I heard it in my room.”

“You lie. I never was in the corridor with the baron. He went with me only as far as the foot of the stairs——”

Edgar’s heart stood still at the barefacedness of the lie. He stared at her with glassy eyeballs, and cried in a voice thick and husky with passion:

“You—were not—in the hall? And he—he did *not* have his arm round you?”

She laughed a cold, dry laugh.

“You were dreaming.”

That was too much. The child, by this time, knew that adults lie and resort to impudent little evasions, lies that slip through fine

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## *The Burning Secret*

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sieves, and cunning ambiguities. But this downright denial of an absolute fact, face to face, threw him into a frenzy.

“Dreaming, was I? Did I dream this bump on my forehead, too?”

“How do I know whom you’ve been rowdy-ing with? But I am not going to argue with you. You are to obey orders. That’s all. Sit down and finish the letter.” She was very pale and was summoning all her strength to keep on her feet.

In Edgar, a last tiny flame of credulity went out. To tread on the truth and extinguish it as one would a burning match was more than he could stomach. His insides congealed in an icy lump, and everything he now said was in a tone of unrestrained, pointed maliciousness.

“So I dreamed what I saw in the hall, did I? I dreamed this bump on my forehead, and that you two went walking in the moonlight

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## *The Tempest*

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and he wanted to make you go down the dark path into the valley? I dreamed all that, did I? What do you think, that I am going to let myself be locked up like a baby? No, I am not so stupid as you think. I know what I know."

He stared into her face impudently. To see her child's face close to her own distorted by hate broke her down completely. Her passion flooded over in a tidal wave.

"Sit down and write that letter, or——"

"Or what?" he sneered.

"Or I'll give you a whipping like a little child."

Edgar drew close to her and merely laughed sardonically.

With that her hand was out and had struck his face. Edgar gave a little outcry, and, like a drowning man, with a dull rushing in his ears and flickerings in his eyes, he struck out blindly with both fists. He felt he encountered

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*The Burning Secret*

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something soft, a face, heard a cry . . .

The cry brought him to his senses. Suddenly he saw himself and his monstrous act—he had struck his own mother.

A dreadful terror came upon him, shame and horror, an impetuous need to get away seized him, to sink into the earth; he wanted to fly far away, far away from those eyes that were upon him. He made for the door and in an instant was gone, down the stairs, through the lobby, out on the road. Away, away, as though a pack of ravening beasts were at his heels.

## CHAPTER XIII

### DAWNING PERCEPTION

AFTER he had put a long stretch of road between him and the hotel, Edgar stopped running. He was panting heavily, and he had to lean against a tree to get his breath back and recover from the trembling of his knees. The horror of his own deed, from which he had been fleeing, clutched at his throat and shook him as with a fever. What should he do now? Where should he run away to? He was already feeling a sinking sensation of loneliness, there in the woods, only a mile or so from the house. Everything seemed different, unfriendlier, unkindier, now that he was alone and helpless. The trees that only the day before had whispered to him like broth-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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ers now gathered together darkly as if in threat. This solitariness in the great unknown world dazed the child. No, he could not stand alone yet. But to whom should he go? Of his father, who was easily excited and unapproachable, he was afraid. Besides, his father would send him straight back to his mother, and Edgar preferred the awfulness of the unknown to that. He felt as though he could never look upon his mother's face again without remembering that he had struck her with his fist.

His grandmother in Bains occurred to him. She was so sweet and kind and had always petted him and come to his rescue when, at home, he was to be the victim of an injustice. He would stay with her until the first storm of wrath had blown over, and then he would write to his parents to ask their forgiveness. In this brief quarter of an hour he had already been so humbled by the mere thought

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## *Dawning Perception*

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of his inexperienced self standing alone in the world that he cursed the stupid pride that a mere stranger's lying had put into him. He no longer wanted to be anything but the child he had been, obedient and patient and without the arrogance that he now felt to be excessive.

But how to reach Bains? He took out his little pocketbook and blessed his luck star that the ten-dollar gold piece given him on his birthday was there safe and sound. He had never got himself to break it. Daily he had inspected his purse to see if it was there and to feast his eyes on the sight of it and gratefully polish it with his handkerchief until it shone like a tiny sun. But would the ten dollars be enough? He had travelled by train many a time without thinking that one had to pay, and still less how much one paid, whether ten or a hundred dollars. For the first time he got an inkling that there were facts in life upon which he had never reflected, and that all the

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## *The Burning Secret*

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many things that surrounded him and he had held in his hands and toyed with somehow contained a value of their own, a special importance. An hour before he had thought he knew everything. Now he realized he had passed by a thousand mysteries and problems without noticing them, and was ashamed that his poor little wisdom had stumbled over the first step it took into life. He grew more and more discouraged, and his footsteps lagged as he drew near the station.

How often he had dreamed of this flight from home, of making a dash for the great Life, becoming king or emperor, soldier or poet! And now he looked timidly at the bright little building ahead of him and thought of nothing but whether his ten dollars would bring him to his grandmother at Bains.

The rails stretched away monotonously into the country, the station was deserted. Edgar went to the window shyly and asked, whisper-

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## *Dawning Perception*

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ing so that nobody but the ticket-seller should hear, how much a ticket to Bains cost. Amused and rather astonished eyes behind spectacles smiled upon the timid child.

“Whole fare or half fare?”

“Whole fare,” stammered Edgar, utterly without pride.

“Three dollars and thirty-five cents.”

“Give me a ticket, please.”

In great relief Edgar shoved the beloved bit of polished gold under the grating, change rattled on the ledge, and Edgar all at once felt immensely wealthy holding the strip of colored paper that guaranteed him his liberty, and with the sound of coin clinking in his pocket.

On examining the timetable he found there would be a train in only twenty minutes, and he retired to a corner, to get away from the few people idling on the platform. Though it was evident they were harboring no suspi-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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cions, the child, as if his flight and his crime were branded on his forehead, felt that they were looking at nothing but him and were wondering why a mere boy such as he should be travelling alone. He drew a great sigh of relief when at last the first whistle sounded in the distance, and the rumbling came closer and closer, and the train that was to carry him out into the great world puffed and snorted into the station.

It was not until Edgar took his seat in the train that he noticed he had secured only a third-class passage. Having always travelled first class, he was again struck with a sense of difference. He saw there were distinctions that had escaped him. His fellow-passengers were unlike those of his first-class trips, a few Italian laborers, with tough hands and uncouth voices, carrying pickaxes and shovels. They sat directly opposite, dull and disconsolate-eyed, staring into space. They must have

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## *Dawning Perception*

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been working very hard on the road, for some of them slept in the rattling coach, open-mouthed, leaning against the hard, soiled wood.

“They have been working to earn money,” came into Edgar’s mind, and he set to guessing how much they earned, but could not decide. And so another disturbing fact impressed itself upon him, that money was something one did not always have on hand, but had to be made somehow or other. And for the first time he became conscious of having taken the ease in which he had been lapped as a matter of course and that to the right and the left of him abysses yawned which his eyes had never beheld. It came to him now with the shock of suddenness that there were trades and professions, that his life was hedged about by innumerable secrets, close at hand and tangible, though he had never noticed them.

Edgar was learning a good deal in that sin-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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gle hour of aloneness and saw many things as he looked out of his narrow compartment into the great wide world. And for all his dark dread, something began to unfold itself gently within him, not exactly happiness as yet, rather a marvelling at the diversity of life. He had fled, he felt, out of fear and cowardice, yet it was his first independent act, and he had experienced something of the reality that he had passed by, until then, without heeding it. Perhaps he himself was now as much of a mystery to his mother and his father as the world had been to him. It was with different eyes that he looked out of the window. He was now viewing actualities, it seemed to him. A veil had been lifted from all things, and they were showing him the core of their purpose, the secret spring of their actions. Houses flew by as though torn away by the wind, and he pictured to himself the people living in them. Were they rich or poor,

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## *Dawning Perception*

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happy or unhappy? Were they filled with the same longing as he to know everything? And were there children in those houses like himself who had merely been playing with things? The flagmen who waved the train no longer seemed like scattered dolls, inanimate objects, toys stationed there by indifferent chance. Edgar now understood that the giving of the signal was their fate, their struggle with life.

The wheels turned faster and faster, along serpentine windings the train made its way downward from the uplands, the mountains took on gentler curves and receded into the distance. The level was reached, and Edgar gave one final glance backward. There were the mountains like blue shadows, remote and inaccessible. And to Edgar it was as though his childhood were reposing up there where they lightly merged with the misty heavens.

## CHAPTER XIV

### DARKNESS AND CONFUSION

WHEN the train pulled into the station at Bains, the street lamps were already lit, and though the station was bright with its red and white and green signals, Edgar unexpectedly felt a dread of the approaching night. In the daytime he would still have been confident. People would have been thronging the streets, and you could sit down on a bench and rest, or look into the shop windows. But how would he be able to stand it when the people had all withdrawn into their homes and gone to bed for a night's peaceful sleep while he, conscious of wrongdoing, wandered about alone in a strange city? Just to have a roof over his head, not to spend another moment

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## *Darkness and Confusion*

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under the open heavens! That was his one distinct feeling.

He hurried along the familiar way without looking to right or left until he reached his grandmother's villa. It was on a beautiful, broad avenue, placed, not free to the gaze of passersby but behind the vines and shrubbery and ivy of a well-kept garden, a gleam behind a cloud of green, a white, old-fashioned, friendly house. Edgar peeped through the iron grill like a stranger. No sound came from within and the windows were closed. Evidently the family and guests were in the garden behind the house.

Edgar was about to pull the door-bell when something odd occurred. Suddenly the thing that only a few hours before had seemed quite natural to him had now become impossible. How was he to go into the house, how meet his grandmother and her family, how endure all the questions they would besiege him with,

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## *The Burning Secret*

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and how answer them? How would he be able to bear the looks they would give him when he would tell, as he would be obliged to, that he had run away from his mother? And, above all, how would he explain his monstrous deed, which he himself no longer understood? A door in the house slammed, and Edgar, in a sudden panic at being detected, ran off.

When he reached the park he paused. It was dark there, and he expected to find it empty and thought it would be a good place to sit down in and rest and at last reflect quietly and come to some understanding with himself about his fate. He passed through the gateway timidly. A few lamps were burning near the entrance, giving the young leaves on the trees a ghostly gleam of transparent green, but deeper in the park, down the hill, everything lay like a single, black, fermenting mass in the darkness.

Edgar, eager to be alone, slipped past the

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*Darkness and Confusion*

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few people who were sitting in the light of the lamps, talking or reading. But even in the deep shadows of the unilluminated pathways it was not quiet. There were low whisperings that seemed to shun the light, sounds mingled with the rustling of the leaves, the scraping of feet, subdued voices, all mingled with a certain voluptuous, sighing, groaning sound that seemed to emanate from people and animals and nature, all in a disturbed sleep. It was a restlessness that had something foreboding in it, something sneaking, hidden, puzzling, a sort of subterranean stirring in the wood that was connected perhaps with nothing but the spring, yet had a peculiarly alarming effect upon the child.

He cowered into a diminutive heap on a bench and tried to think of what he was to say at home. But his thoughts slipped away from him as on a slippery surface before he could grasp his own ideas, and in spite of himself he

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## *The Burning Secret*

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had to keep listening and listening to the muffled tones, the mystical voices of the darkness. How terrible the darkness was, how bewildering and yet how mysteriously beautiful!

Were they animals, or people, or was it merely the ghostly hand of the wind that wove together all this rustling and crackling and whirring? He listened. It was the wind gently moving the tree tops. No, it wasn't, it was people—now he could see distinctly—couples arm in arm, who came up from the lighted city to enliven the darkness with their perplexing presence. What were they after? He could not make out. They were not talking to each other, because he heard no voices. All he could catch was the sound of their tread on the gravel and here and there the sight of their figures moving like shadows past some clear space between the trees, always with their arms round each other, like his mother and the baron in the moonlight.

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## *Darkness and Confusion*

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So the great, dazzling, portentous secret was here, too.

Steps approached. A subdued laugh. Edgar, for fear of being discovered, drew deeper into the dark. But the couple now groping their way in the deep gloom had no eyes for him. They passed him by, closely locked, and they stopped only a few feet beyond his bench. They pressed their faces together. Edgar could not see clearly, but he heard a soft groan from the woman, and the man stammering mad, ardent words. A sort of sultry presentiment touched Edgar's alarm with a shudder that was sensual and pleasant.

The couple stayed thus a minute or so, and then the gravel crunched under their tread again, and the sound of their footsteps died away in the darkness.

A tremor went through Edgar. His blood whirled hot through his veins, and all of a sudden he felt unbearably alone in this be-

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## *The Burning Secret*

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wildering darkness, and the need came upon him with elemental force for the sound of a friend's voice, an embrace, a bright room, people he loved. The whole perplexing dark of this night seemed to be inside his breast and rending it.

He jumped up. To be at home, just to be at home, anywhere at home in a warm, bright room, in some relation with people. What could happen to him then? Even if they were to scold and beat him, he would not mind after that darkness and the dread of loneliness.

Unconsciously he made his way back to his grandmother's villa, and found himself standing with the cool doorbell in his hand again. Now, he observed, the lighted windows were shining through the foliage, and he pictured each room belonging to each window and the people inside. This very proximity to familiar beings, the comforting sense of being near people who, he knew, loved him was delight-

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## *Darkness and Confusion*

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ful, and if he hesitated it was simply to taste this joy a little longer.

Suddenly a terrified voice behind him shrieked:

“Edgar! Why, here he is!”

It was his grandmother's maid. She pounced on him and grabbed his hand. The door was pulled open from within, a dog jumped at Edgar, barking, people came running, and voices of mingled alarm and joy called out. The first to meet Edgar was his grandmother with outstretched arms, and behind her—he thought he must be dreaming—his mother.

Tears came to Edgar's eyes, and he stood amid this ardent outburst of emotions quivering and intimidated, undecided what to say or do and very uncertain of his own feelings. He was not sure whether he was glad or frightened.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE LAST DREAM

THEY had been looking for him in Bains for some time. His mother, in spite of her anger, had been alarmed when he did not return, and had had search made for him all over Summering. The whole place was aroused, and people were making every sort of dreadful conjecture when a man brought the news that he had seen the child at the ticket-office. Inquiry at the railroad station, of course, brought out that Edgar had bought a ticket to Bains, and his mother, without hesitation, took the very next train after him, telegraphing first to his father and to his grandmother.

The family held on to Edgar, but not for-

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## *The Last Dream*

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cibly. On the contrary, they led him with an air of suppressed triumph into the front room. And how odd it was that he did not mind their reproaches, because he saw happiness and love in their eyes. And even their assumed anger lasted only a second or two. His grandmother was embracing him again tearfully, no one spoke of his bad conduct, and he felt the wondrousness of the protection surrounding him.

The maid took off his coat and brought him a warmer one, and his grandmother asked if he did not want something to eat. They pestered him with their inquiries and their tenderness, but stopped questioning him when they noticed how embarrassed he was. He experienced deliciously the sensation that he had so despised before of being wholly a child, and he was ashamed of his arrogance of the last few days when he had wanted to dispense with it all and exchange it for the deceptive joy of solitariness.

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## *The Burning Secret*

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The telephone rang in the next room. He heard his mother's voice in snatches, "Edgar—back. Got here—last train," and he marvelled that she had not flown at him in a passion. She had put her arms round him, with a peculiarly constrained expression in her eyes.

He began to regret his conduct more and more, and he would have liked to extricate himself from his grandmother's and aunt's tenderness, to run to his mother and beg her pardon and tell her, by herself, oh, so humbly, that he wanted to be a child again and obey her. But when he rose, with a perfectly gentle movement, his grandmother asked in alarm where he was going. He felt ashamed. If he made a single step it frightened them. He had frightened them all terribly, and they were afraid he was going to run away again. How could he make them understand that nobody regretted his flight more than he did?

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The table was set, supper had been prepared for him hurriedly. His grandmother sat beside him without removing her eyes from him. She and his aunt and the maid held him fast in a quiet circle, the warmth of which calmed him wonderfully, and the only disturbing thought was that of his mother's absence from the room. If only she could have guessed how humble he was she would certainly have come in.

From outside came the sound of a cab drawing up at the door. Everyone gave a start, so that Edgar also was upset. His grandmother went out, he could hear loud voices in the hall, and then it struck him it must be his father who had arrived. He observed timidly that he had been left alone in the room. To be alone even for those few moments made him nervous. His father was a stern man; he was the one person Edgar really feared. He listened. His father seemed to be excited;

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his voice was loud and expressed annoyance. Every now and then came his grandmother's and his mother's voices in mollifying tones, in attempts, evidently, to make him adopt a milder attitude. But his father's voice remained hard—hard as his foot-treads now coming nearer, and nearer, and now stopping short at the door, which was next pulled violently open.

The boy's father was a large man, and Edgar felt so very, very thin beside him as he entered the room, nervous and genuinely angry, it seemed.

"What got into your head to run away? How could you give your mother such a fright?" His voice was wrathful and his hands made a wild movement.

Edgar's mother came in and stood behind her husband, her face in shadow.

Edgar made no reply. He felt he had to justify himself, but how tell the story of the

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way they had lied to him and how his mother had slapped him? Would his father understand?

“Well, where’s your tongue? What was the matter? You may tell me, you needn’t be afraid. You must have had some good reason for running away. Did anyone do anything to you?”

Edgar hesitated. At the recollection of the events in Summering, his anger began to flare up again, and he was about to bring his charge against his mother when he saw—his heart stood still—that she was making an odd gesture behind his father’s back. At first he did not comprehend. But he kept his eyes fixed on her and noticed that the expression of her face was beseeching. Then very, very softly she lifted her finger to her mouth in sign that he should keep everything to himself.

The child was conscious of a great wild joy

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pouring in a warm wave over his whole body. He knew she was giving him the secret to guard and that a human destiny was hanging in the balance on his child's lips. Filled with a jubilant pride that she reposed confidence in him he suddenly became possessed by a desire for self-sacrifice. He magnified his own wrong-doing in order to show how much of a man he had grown to be. Collecting his wits, he said:

"No, no. There was no good reason for my running away. Mamma was very kind to me, but I didn't behave myself, and I was ashamed, and so—and so I ran away."

The father looked at his son in amazement. Such a confession was the last thing he expected to hear. His wrath was disarmed.

"Well, if you're sorry, then it's all right, and we won't say any more about it to-day. You'll be careful in the future, though, not to do anything of the sort again." He paused

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and looked at Edgar, and his voice was milder as he went on. "How pale you are, boy! But I believe you've grown taller in this short while. I hope you won't be guilty of such childish behavior again because really you're not a child any more, and you ought to be sensible."

Edgar, the whole time, had kept looking at his mother. Something peculiar seemed to be glowing in her eyes, or was it the reflection of the light? No, it was something new, her eyes were moist, and there was a smile on her lips that said "Thank you" to him.

They sent him to bed, but he was not now distressed at being left alone. He had such a wealth of things to think over. All the agony of the past days was dissipated by the tremendous sense of his first experience of life. He felt happy in a mysterious presentiment of future experiences. Outside, the trees were rustling in the gloomy night, but he was not

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scared. He had lost all impatience at having to wait for life now that he knew how rich it was. For the first time that day, it seemed to him, he had seen life naked, no longer veiled behind the thousand lies of childhood he saw it in its complete, fearful, voluptuous beauty. Never had he supposed that days could be crowded so full of transitions from sorrow to joy and back again, and it made him happy to think there were many more such days in store for him and that a whole life was waiting to reveal its mystery to him. A first inkling had come to him of the diversity of life. For the first time, he thought, he understood men's beings, that they heeded each other even when they seemed to be inimical, and that it was very sweet to be loved by them. He was incapable of thinking of anything or anybody with hate. He regretted nothing and had a sense of gratitude even to the baron, his bitterest enemy, because it was he who had

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opened the door for him to this world of dawning emotions.

It was very sweet to be lying in the dark thinking thoughts that were mingled vaguely with dreams and were lapsing almost into sleep.

Was it a dream or did Edgar really hear the door open and someone creep softly into his room? He was too sleepy to open his eyes and look. Then he felt a breath upon his face and the touch of another face, soft and warm and gentle, against his, and he knew it was his mother who was kissing him and stroking his hair. He felt her kisses and her tears, and responded to her caresses. He took them as reconciliation and gratitude for his silence. It was not until many years later that he really understood these silent tears and knew they were a vow, of this woman verging on middle age, to dedicate herself henceforth to her child and renounce adventure and all

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desire on her own behalf. They were a farewell. He did not know that she was thanking him for more than his silence. She was grateful that he had rescued her from a barren experience, and in these caresses was bequeathing him the bitter-sweet legacy of her love for his future life. Nothing of all this did the child lying there comprehend, but he felt it was blissful to be so loved and that by this love he was already entangled in the great secret of the world.

When she had withdrawn her hand from his head and her lips from his lips, and with a light swish of her skirts had left the room, something warm remained behind, a breath upon Edgar's mouth. And a seductive longing came upon him to feel such soft lips upon his and to be so tenderly embraced often and often again.

But this divination of the great secret, so longed for, was already clouded over by sleep.

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Once again all the happenings of the past hours flitted through Edgar's mind, once again the leaves in the book of his childhood were turned alluringly, then the child fell asleep, and the profounder dream of his life began.

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